

Bloom into You

Regarding Saeki Sayaka



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NOVEL

2

Bloom₂ into You

Regarding Saeiki Sayaka

2



STORY | Hitoma Iruma
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And so I said nothing.

I swallowed what I thought was right and
chose to be wrong.

That was the decision I made, that I
thought would allow me to stay by Touko's
side and someday connect with her.

I will never forget that choice.

I must never forget.



The background of the page is a monochromatic, olive-green illustration. It depicts two figures from the waist down, standing in a shallow pool of water, likely rain. The figure on the left is wearing dark, knee-length shorts and dark loafers. The figure on the right is wearing a dark skirt and dark loafers. Both figures are holding umbrellas, which are mostly obscured by the rain and the overall tone of the illustration. The ground is covered with fallen leaves, and the overall atmosphere is somber and artistic.

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STORY BY

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Seven Seas Entertainment

Love, Me, and Yuu

THIS MAY SOUND ARROGANT, but I was the one who was always by Nanami Touko's side.

I'd heard that the antiquated student council room was once the calligraphy room. When I took a break from work and raised my head, the scent of wood I had grown accustomed to over the past year drifted to my nose. I turned my head to check on the origin of that fragrance and was met with the aroma of tea next. A black-haired upperclassman, who was working with me, was shifting the mug in her hand back and forth, swirling the liquid within. The steam rising from the mug intermingled with the light breaking through the room and dispersed like faint clouds.

Then, as though she had just realized something, the upperclassman paused and glanced at me. "Where's Touko?"

Privately, I was kind of pleased that she was asking me about Touko's plans.

"Oh, she had something today..." I responded ambiguously and turned to look out the window. It should be happening around now. Trees clustered around the student council room like they were bestowing blessings on it, and somewhere deep within those trees Touko was currently receiving a confession of love from a boy in our year. Confessions often took place in that spot, probably because it was conveniently shaded by trees and buildings where few people roamed.

I wonder just how many confessions Touko had turned down in that spot. At least ten, by my count. She hadn't asked me for advice this time, but it was easy to draw conclusions from the gossip making the rounds... However, that might just have been because I was making an effort to learn everything I possibly could about Nanami Touko.

Though I knew that Touko would never accept a confession, I couldn't relax. I couldn't picture her without myself by her side, and I wasn't just imagining what could be—I was already her constant companion in reality, and I didn't want to be dethroned.

It had been a year since I started getting to know Touko, and I felt that I understood her very well. Far better than the others in our year or in the student council, at least. Anyone could see that Touko was remarkable, but I believed I was the only person in the school who'd gotten to see her more vulnerable side, even if I'd just caught

glimpses of it. It was only natural that she wouldn't want people to know her weaknesses, of course. Touko had a reason for hiding that side of herself—a very good one.

...It had been a year since I had met Nanami Touko. And in that time, I had only fallen deeper in love with her.

I was sure everyone around her felt the same. That was just how charming Touko was, inside and out. Our classmates were clearly drawn to her, so I concluded that she was universally appealing. She had stolen my heart at first sight, and I was certainly not the only one.

That being the case, one might say it was only natural that Touko received confessions so frequently it could be called routine. Still, it bothered me, and that was why I was secretly relieved when Touko showed back up at the student council room before too long.

But this time, something was different.

She wasn't alone.

Light and shadows stretched in through the door that had been flung open wide enough to allow two people to enter. I ran through a mental list of the student council members, but we were all there except for the president. And the second person was obviously smaller than Touko, with a nervous shrinking of the shoulders characteristic of an underclassman. The student standing at Touko's side was silhouetted against a light so blinding that I couldn't see her face at first.

I hadn't forgotten the girl I met during elementary school.

I hadn't been able to forget Senpai, whom I met during junior high.

After meeting her in high school, I was convinced I would never forget Nanami Touko for the rest of my life.

And finally, there was one other person I knew I would never forget.

The first year named Koito Yuu was the underclassman I was most conscious of in high school. She was petite and seemed a little sensitive about her own short stature. Her light-colored hair was tied up in pigtails, and she told us she had come to the student council after being talked into it by her homeroom teacher. Though she had a passive attitude, she was a diligent worker, so I thought we'd found ourselves a good helper.

Touko seemed to like her too, which gave me a bit of pause. I'd begun to suspect that they had more than a simple under and

upperclassman relationship after a one-on-one conversation with the girl.

“Koito-san.” I’d called out to her. She turned immediately, greeting me in return, though once she came over to me, she looked around noticeably as though checking behind her.

I looked behind us as well out of curiosity, but all I could see was the path we were walking on and the distant school buildings.

“Where is Nanami-senpai?”

“We’re not *always* together.” I smiled a bit as I said it. “Touko will be here later.”

“I see.”

Koito-san’s shoulders slumped, almost as though she were slightly relieved. Maybe she just wasn’t that great at handling Touko? Or perhaps she felt intimidated by her? When I first started high school, I’d been reluctant to talk to upperclassmen, too. Not to mention that this was Touko we were talking about, and facing her might never become any less nerve-racking.

When I opened the student council room with the key I had borrowed from the faculty room, Koito-san muttered, “Ah, so it’s normally locked.”

She had never been the earliest to show up and had apparently never paid any mind to the lock and key. Well, she wasn’t an actual member of the student council yet—just helping out—so it would have been odd for her to have access to the key.

She looked up at me with a reserved smile. “I’m lucky you came when you did, upperclassman.”

“You’re quite welcome.”

Speaking to underclassmen always made me recall the choir club from junior high. I think I’d expected to become the head of the club, but at the same time, didn’t feel well suited to it. I didn’t have it in me to take up a leadership position where I’d need to rally people together. Wanting to support the kind of person who *can* be a leader and the joy of being by their side...might have been one of the reasons why I was drawn to Touko.

Once we entered the room, I immediately started organizing documents. We didn’t have any major events right now, but by this time next month, things would be very different.

“I’m sorry, I made this without asking. Is that okay?” Koito-san made coffee for the two of us, offering me a cup.

“Thank you.”

When I took it, she sat down across from me with the desk between us. Though she was self-deprecating about being so easily swayed, it seemed she felt comfortable in the place it had led her to. Perhaps the natural scenery visible through the window, far from the framework of the main school buildings, helped put her at ease.

I carefully took a sip of the steaming coffee. The heat felt surprising on the tip of my tongue. But as I drank it slowly, that heat turned into warmth. The particular warmth that visited me during the period when spring was at its climax settled my heart, though the temperature difference of the liquid that slid down my throat made my arms quiver slightly.

This felt nostalgic. I had also poured coffee for my upperclassmen when I was a first year. My memories quivered on the surface of the pitch-black liquid as I reflected on them.

“Nanami-senpai isn’t the president, right?”

“Hm?”

I lifted my face at Koito-san’s abrupt question. When my eyes met hers, she rather hastily clarified her intention. “It’s just, I haven’t seen the actual president at all.”

“Ah, yes...of course.” I recalled President Kuze’s insincere smile and laugh. Touko certainly did seem much more presidential than him. “He’s apparently busy with club activities.”

“But he still became the president?”

“Only because the other candidates from last year were even less reliable.”

It helped that the people around him had been hard at work supporting him. Having Nanami Touko go around promoting President Kuze during election time probably left quite the impression on everyone.

“His term in office ends next month, so we’ll have elections again this year.”

“Mm-hmm,” she responded half-heartedly. I hadn’t really cared who would become president the previous year, but this year was different.

As though my thoughts had slipped out, Koito-san voiced the very same thing on my mind. “Is Nanami-senpai running as a candidate?”

“Yes.” And if that was what Touko desired, then I would stand

by her.

“What about you, Saeki-senpai?”

“I will be helping Touko.” I wanted not to surpass Touko but to walk at her side. “I imagine we’ll need your help as well, Koito-san.” Though whether this was part of her actual student council duties was a bit of a grey area.

“Oh, yes. My teacher mentioned that.”

“Have you decided whether you’d like to become a student council officer?”

Maki-kun, another underclassman who had come to observe and help, had already announced that he wanted to become an officer. And President Kuze had proudly said that he was recruiting an underclassman himself, though I wasn’t that confident in anyone *he* would recommend. They said birds of a feather flocked together, after all.

“Well...I sort of feel like it might end up happening.” Koito-san spoke almost as though she had no control over it. Perhaps she wasn’t very good at making her own decisions. Then again, I thought relatively few people excelled in that area. Even I wasn’t sure how much I’d chosen certain things thus far.

And as I watched Touko, I began to suspect that choosing something for yourself didn’t mean it was the right choice.

“Um...”

“Is something wrong?”

Koito-san paused before continuing. After glancing at the window, she nervously wiped away the coffee wetting her lips. As I waited and wondered what was wrong, she finally opened her mouth again. “What kind of person is Nanami-senpai?”

“She’s exactly what she looks like.”

My response was innocuous, but it wasn’t a lie. Touko was intelligent, pretty, and genuinely had it all, and she was also a coward. It was possible to see her hidden and indistinct inner workings if you paid close enough attention.

“What does she seem like to you, Koito-san?” I asked her back, a bit spitefully. At that, Koito-san’s forehead wrinkled as though she were deep in thought, and she turned her gaze down toward her coffee cup.

“She’s cool, good at her work, beautiful, and kind.”

“That’s exactly right.”

She'd just described what Touko seemed like on the surface. Though I questioned that last part about her being kind—she was certainly friendly, but I doubted Touko had the time to be kind to those around her at present.

"If you really want to get to know her, why don't you just ask her yourself?" Of course, I knew Touko would never expose her true self like that. She probably didn't even want to open up to me, to my mild frustration.

"Hmm..." Koito-san closed her eyes and hummed.

If Touko were ever to lay herself bare, I was sure she would only do it for someone who had no interest in seeing her do it. Someone who held neither affection or disillusionment when it came to Touko, despite being close to her.

I wondered whether such a person could possibly exist.

"A lot of people don't actually understand themselves very well, huh?" Koito-san smiled wryly, sounding like she was talking to herself.

Her words seemed to melt into the quiet of the student council room as I silently contemplated them. Was there anything I didn't know about the person called Saeki Sayaka? I was certain of my motives and dreams thus far. I was no longer vexed by love, as I had been in the past, and I could see what kind of person I wanted to be.

I realized, unexpectedly, that I had become a simple person. I had allowed only the things that interested me to remain and cleared away the rest. Maybe it was because I was currently occupied for the most part by my feelings for Touko. If I were to someday convey how I felt to her, I would become an unknown version of myself again.

Yes, someday.

Even after reaching my second spring of high school, that someday still had yet to come into bloom.

I drank from my coffee cup until it was half-empty.

Perhaps because no one had showed up yet, Koito-san started talking to me again. "Did Nanami-senpai have something to do?"

"That's what she said, but someone might be confessing their love to her again," I replied jokingly but was a possibility.

"Have you ever been confessed to, Saeki-senpai?" Koito-san leaned towards me slightly, full of curiosity.

When I heard the word *confessed*, I felt a slight pang run through the back of my head. I couldn't think of *that* as a confession

anymore.

"I suppose you could say I have." I had experienced one or two more confessions since entering high school, though it didn't happen to me as often as it did to Touko. Of course, I rejected them on the spot. They hadn't even been people I interacted much with, and their names and faces were now hazy.

"Oh, I knew it."

"You *knew* it?"

"The stuff I said about Nanami-senpai applies to you, too. You're cool, you get your work done, and you're beautiful." Koito-san seemed delighted at first and then grew embarrassed by saying those things in front of the person she was talking about. She tried to play it off by looking away and smiling ambiguously.

"You're not going to tell me I'm kind, too?" I said to tease her.

Koito-san kept her eyes turned away from me. "I'm sorry."

"It was a joke."

I really wasn't all that kind, anyway. If she had told me I was, I would probably have replied that she wasn't much of a judge of character.

Koito-san brought the coffee cup up to her lips and paused. Then she turned her eyes back toward me. "When you were confessed to, how did you feel?"

So she's going to keep this conversation going, I thought. She was more engrossed by the topic of romance than I had expected. But then again—I corrected myself. I didn't know much about Koito-san. When it came to this underclassman, I couldn't distinguish what was unexpected and what wasn't.

"Conflicted."

"Conflicted?"

"About how best to turn them down without hurting their feelings."

My own experience naturally made me take on that attitude.

Koito-san smiled slightly. "You really *are* kind, upperclassman."

"I was just being respectful, that's all." I respected the feeling of caring for someone, because those feelings now motivated my every move. I knew all too well the anxiety and conflict that accompanied them, so I couldn't be too blunt. Even if I couldn't reciprocate their feelings, I wanted to answer in a way that wouldn't make those feelings feel dismissed.

“Do you like anyone, upperclassman?”

“That’s a secret.” Though saying that was basically confirming that I did, I drew the line at stating it outright. “And you? Do you have someone you like?”

I’d asked thinking that she would reply coyly, like I did, but Koito-san’s lips pursed stiffly. She frowned unhappily for a moment and then answered in a matter-of-fact voice. “I don’t.”

“I see.”

I wondered whether she was aware of the expression on her face. Why did her eyes look pleading, as though she were lost in an unknown land?

To be unhappy about not having someone you liked was an interesting new perspective. At the time, my surprise at her reaction was enough to make me feel that she was quite an amusing underclassman.

But it didn’t take long for me to revise my opinion entirely.

Ever since the day that Touko chose her.

It happened during the student council election the next month.

President Kuze was coming to the end of his term as student council president, and was transferring his duties. In the process, we talked about the next election, and I was just about to turn the conversation towards what Touko and I would do when I heard Touko address someone.

“I’m going to need a campaign manager. Someone to help me with election activities and such. Could you do that for me, Koito-san?” Touko’s voice was light, without a single ulterior motive behind it.

I think I may have been even more surprised than Koito-san, to whom the request had been posed. It was a piercing shock, as though Touko had abruptly started speaking fluently in a language I had never heard before. She wasn’t looking at me. She was looking straight at Koito-san.

In that moment, I wasn’t the one standing by Touko’s side. The voices of the president and Maki-kun, who had been standing nearby, stopped reaching my ears.

All my life, I’ve been helpless when it comes to coping with the unexpected. I think I’m generally quick to understand once I overcome my initial shock, but being clever also means that you have to be aware of what’s going on around you. People adapt to their environments, whether for better or worse. Perhaps I, too, had gone

soft while at Touko's side.

Was I lacking something necessary for Touko to choose me?

Had I neglected something?

Or...

Was Touko the one who had changed?

I was confident that I had observed Touko more closely than anyone else had. If a change like that had occurred in her, my heart told me I couldn't have missed it. Even if I hadn't noticed it right away, I would surely have cottoned on with time, and since I hadn't been able to do that yet, it must have happened recently.

Just recently. Just a short time ago. If there was something that had changed Touko, then...

I looked shakily at Touko and then at Koito-san.

Koito-san remained unable to answer, staring at Touko as though trying to understand her intent.

"I had no idea you lived here, Koito-san."

When I took a detour to the bookstore after school, I was welcomed by an unexpected face. My underclassman, who had now officially become a member of the student council, was sitting behind the counter.

"You must have been in quite a rush if you're still in your uniform."

"I had to take over the register as soon as I got home." Koito-san smiled with an effort. Then, feigning the air of a regular store employee, she added, "Please take your time."

As I walked away from the counter and strolled around the paperback area, I occasionally caught glimpses of Koito-san. She was sitting obediently, just as she did when she was at the student council room. The way she sat so still gave me the impression that she was still quite childlike. I felt like I saw immaturity in her—like she would struggle to work supporting other people.

That was probably what one would call jealousy.

The student council election had gone off without a hitch, resulting in Touko becoming president and me becoming vice president. Though I had helped, I think that Koito-san worked hard as well. Her endorsement speech was rather good, I suppose.

"....."

I think that the results would have likely been the same if I had been Touko's endorser.

But Touko had chosen Koito-san.

Of course, she was free to do as she wished. I knew, rationally, that it would have been presumptuous to expect things to go exactly as I wanted. And yet, something still bothered me. Touko had given me many reasons for appointing Koito-san to the role she had. All of them had sounded true enough and seemed very well thought out. Clearly, she had carefully chosen her words to sound that way.

That Touko was being so careful meant that there was something she was trying to hide. And what she was trying to hide was the true reason why she had chosen Koito-san rather than me.

I couldn't believe it.

I just couldn't fathom what it was about Koito-san that had so caught Touko's attention, no matter how much I observed our underclassman. I wondered how she looked in Touko's eyes.

Still, I thought as I looked around the cramped bookstore, people certainly are connected in unexpected ways.

Though Koito-san probably didn't remember it, I could easily recall the day I visited this store in order to buy a book by Hayashi Renma. Which meant that the junior high school student I'd seen that day had been Koito-san herself. *Doesn't look like she's gotten much bigger since then, has she?*

I might have grown taller than her, but I hadn't grown much on the inside. I had fallen in love with someone, been swept off my feet by those feelings, and was now feeling troubled and jealous. I suppose the only thing that had really changed was the book I was holding right now. Instead of choosing books to try to impress others, I had picked out a book *I* wanted to read.

No... Back then, I really *had* wanted to become like Senpai, I suppose. Those transient feelings were genuine, though I was less certain whether the same could be said for how Senpai felt toward me.

"Could I get these?"

When I held the books out at the register, Koito-san straightened up as if coming out of a daze. "Thank you very much." She looked curiously at the covers of the books I handed to her. "Essays?"

"I'm not all that into fiction."

I remembered a lie I had once told and wondered whether that lie brought happiness to anyone.

“So, what kind of books does the child of a bookseller read?”

“Hmm... I like mostly mystery and sci-fi.”

Mystery, eh? It reminded me of a certain corner of the bookshelf in my room.

“Touko comes here every once in a while too, doesn’t she?”

“Huh?” Koito-san froze for a moment, as though the topic the conversation had turned to had caught her by surprise. “Yes, occasionally,” she answered as she continued with her work. I thought there was something vacant about her movements. It was like her voice lacked any emotion...or like she was hiding them so I wouldn’t notice.

“What kinds of books does Touko like?” I ended up asking, though it verged on prying. I wondered how much Koito-san was aware of my intentions.

“Well, let me think. She likes reference books...and she buys the latest bestselling novels pretty often, too.”

“Uh-huh...”

Those were things I knew before I even asked. But Koito-san and I often turned the conversation to Touko when we were alone together. Maybe it was because Touko was what we both had in common, though I was beginning to wonder whether that was all there was to it.

I paid for the books and accepted the paper bag. After putting it away in my school bag, I turned my back to Koito-san.

“See you tomorrow.”

“Right...”

We exchanged superficial goodbyes and parted.

As I headed towards the exit, I took a deep breath, filled my lungs with the dry scent of the cramped, paper-stuffed store. When I stepped outside, I was greeted by the soft, slanting light of the sinking sun. As it dyed the roofs of the town, I felt delayed self-loathing seeping in. What was I doing to my own underclassman?

I quickened my pace, as if trying to escape the spiteful upperclassman I had become. Why was it that the dusk pressing down on my back made me feel even more frantic, I wonder?

I got home, went to my room, and pulled out the book I had bought. Pulling off the wrapping, I walked to my bookshelf. The novels that were not to my taste remained in that same corner of my bookshelf. I put my fingers on the spines, half-pulled them out, then

reconsidered as I pulled my hand away. I hadn't read them since I put them here. I wasn't interested in fiction.

Maybe I really hadn't changed since junior high. I was still trying to work myself to the bone for the person I cared for. Just as the phrase indicated, I would grind myself away until I disappeared.

But I couldn't think of anything else I could do for her—for Touko.

“...No, I suppose that's a lie.”

There was one thing I could do. I just didn't want to think about it.

I sat down on the edge of my bed and looked at the uniform I was still wearing.

I couldn't calm down lately, and it wasn't just because of Touko. I kept suddenly being assailed by the panicky feeling that I was standing in an unfamiliar place all alone.

Koito Yuu. There was something about that girl.

Whatever it was, I had a hunch that it was significant to Touko, and that in time, it might even shake the foundation of my world. Melodramatic as it sounded, I knew I felt something big brewing.

Nanami Touko was changing. I didn't know whether Touko was aware of it herself, but it was easy to see for someone who watched her closer than anyone else. The changes were still furtive and incredibly minute, but now that they had started, they would surely accelerate. Though I couldn't be sure that the changes would result in something good, Touko, who had been constant and immutable since I first met her a year ago, was starting to change.

“.....”

And what had changed her was probably Koito-san's presence.

I wondered what Touko saw in Koito-san.

Theories that I didn't want to think about passed through my head one after another. *Surely not...* I thought, but as I considered the signs that pointed precisely in that direction, I wondered how best to approach things from here.

I didn't think it would be good for Touko to stay the way she was. But I was terrified of whether I could remain by Touko's side once she lost her obsession. Though I prayed for Touko to change someday, I didn't have the courage to hasten the arrival of that day and had instead chosen to remain silently at her side. That was the best I could do, it seemed.

To pick up on things quickly meant becoming a coward.

As I mused over what my grandmother had once said, I held out my hand and flexed it, pushing my fingers apart as much as I could.

There wasn't really much I didn't understand about myself.

Even my limits were easy to find when I looked closely enough.

After that, as summer approached, Touko suddenly called the girl by her name one day.

It happened quite casually, while we were going about our usual work in the student council. When I heard Touko quickly saying, "Yuu," her voice seemed to pierce right through my ears and sink into my stomach. Koito-san responded to her unshaken, without even pausing her work.

Sweat formed on my back.

I remembered the time I had mustered up the courage to call Touko by her name when we were first years.

The words flowed between them easily, far removed from the joy I had once felt in my chest, like I had just struck gold. *When did this happen? What does it mean?* The questions swirling in my head rooted me to the spot.

When Doujima-kun, one of the other student council officers, pointed it out, Touko simply responded, "I thought it couldn't hurt to be a bit friendlier, right?"

Even Manaka and Midori were on a first-name basis with Touko. So it really wasn't a big deal. Or was it?

"Well, in *that* case...perhaps I should call Koito-san by her first name as well," I stubbornly proposed. I wanted to show her that it wasn't special for Touko to call her by her first name.

I wondered what kind of expression was on Touko's face. I was too afraid to look, and my vision started to tunnel.

"Sure. If you want." Koito-san's eyes had gone round at the sudden turn of events.

Faced with her reaction, my panic subsided a bit. I withdrew and strived to compose myself as I took a deep breath. Then, I dove deep into hiding.

Though there wasn't anything within myself that I didn't understand, the things I didn't understand about those around me were increasing. An underclassman I had only seen as a hard worker at first had become an enigma, as opaque as a swamp.

Given everything that had happened so far, I thought things were still all right for the moment.

But at the same time, I sensed that it was unlikely to stay that way for long.

If I tried to remember when this next part happened, I wouldn't know where to start. Maybe we didn't really exchange any words at all, or perhaps it all happened at the boundary of a dream. Regardless, Koito-san and I were there.

We were alone together in the student council room. I was sitting and working on odd jobs as usual when Koito-san prepared tea.

"Thank you," I said politely and took the mug. I didn't immediately sip it but instead cupped it as though I were holding onto its warmth, while Koito-san sat across from me. She immediately sipped the tea and gave a small sigh.

"It must be difficult being an underclassman."

"But weren't you one just last year?" Koito-san smiled. That was true enough. If anything, I had been an underclassman for the majority of my high school career thus far. It was just that it didn't actually feel that way, perhaps because my second year felt more substantial than my first.

When I say substantial, I mean that it was charged with intensity, full of new experiences. Of course, they weren't all positive. What I had gained since meeting Koito-san certainly hadn't all been bright and rosy.

Then I noticed my underclassman's face was turned down and that there was a shadow hanging over her. "Is there something wrong?"

She was trying to hide her own weakness, just like Touko had in the past...though that might just be the nature of the human heart. She wouldn't allow the parts of herself she perceived as weak to be exposed.

So in response to my question, Koito-san just smiled as she said, "No, not really."

The old version of me would have let it go with an "I see." But this time, though I didn't know why exactly, I felt as though I couldn't just run from what was occurring right before my eyes. Touko and Koito-san had already started moving. Maybe I just wanted to make up the distance that had appeared between us at some point, if only by a little.

And most importantly, right at that moment, I was her upperclassman.

“Is it about Touko?”

That was more or less all I could think of that might be troubling Koito-san. Besides, I thought this might be a chance to get even a slight glimpse of how Koito-san had captivated Touko.

Perhaps I said it because I knew she felt the same way I did.

People act as though they don't see themselves, but in actuality, they're very self-involved. When a person evaluates others, they use themselves as a standard of comparison. People are very familiar with their own appearances.

Koito-san didn't answer. I watched the corners of her lips sink gloomily, and abruptly ventured a little further. “You're happy you've found someone you like, but you're concerned about the distance between the two of you.”

“Distance?”

I nodded. “The distance between you gives that person a kind of charm.” Sometimes it's that distance, that particular angle, that attracts someone to another person. “You're trying to get closer by moving ahead...but when you do that, you see the other person from an angle you hadn't seen before. The backdrop changes, and things that were hidden before become visible. Even the things you liked about the person might look entirely different.”

But when you changed positions, the other person's view of you changed, too. The change in perspective might make them feel renewed affection for you—or lose interest in you.

I was too preoccupied with my own problems to see that.

“It happens all the time, I think. The other person will change, and you'll change, too. That's all there is to it, and maybe that isn't so bad.”

I'd once parted ways with someone when those changes weren't in sync with each other, and the same could easily happen again someday. But I couldn't just stop changing either, so I kept a close eye on everything, including myself. And while I was staring so fixedly, things began to move around me.

The realization that finally dawned on me was so simple, but I might have been a bit too late in coming to it. I had rejected change, choosing to remain by her as she stood in one place. But while I stayed in place, she started to walk, following a girl who was passing by.

It's rare for any two people to wish for the same thing. I wished to be by her side, but she didn't particularly wish to be by mine.

By the time I raised my head, they were already far ahead of me.

"Why don't you change with her?" *If that's what Touko wants.* Though I couldn't say everything I wanted to, I tried to convey it to Koito-san in a roundabout way. I think we understood each other.

"You're right." Though her voice and posture were still sunken, my underclassman nodded slowly and firmly.

"Hrmm..." I couldn't look directly at her, so I gave an exaggerated frown instead.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I was just wondering when you became such an obedient little underclassman."

"What? That's so rude..." Koito-san held her teacup halfway to her lips as she looked up at me. "I think I've been pretty responsive with you at least, Saeki-senpai."

"I suppose." She was certainly several times more perfunctory with me than when she talked to Touko. "But that's because you couldn't care less about me."

When I said that outright, Koito-san squinted at me, astonished.

"Well, I guess you could put it that way, if you really wanted to be harsh..." It seemed that she had also given up on dressing up her words. "You don't really choose your words carefully, do you, Saeki-senpai?"

"Not when it comes to you."

I had many people with whom I chose my words carefully: my family members, the teachers from my lessons, and of course Touko. But when I talked to Koito-san, for whatever reason, I didn't really bother with that. Perhaps she was like a mirror, in a way.

Though I couldn't put into words why so many people yearned for Koito-san, I could feel it on my skin and in the air.

"It's important to have people like that too, though. If you're always choosing your words with care, you'll just tire yourself out."

"...That's true." My underclassman broke into a smile. When she smiled, she looked a little more childish, filled with a natural sweetness.

It seemed that Koito-san had accepted me as a person who fulfilled that role for her as well. Though it didn't necessarily make things any different than before, it felt like we had actually become

friends.

I didn't know if it was the beginning of something or the end. Either way, the surface of the tea did not show me the answer, no matter how long I swirled it around.

Or perhaps it was both.

The hunch I had felt at some point in time eventually became reality. Touko changed more and more. She went through the preparations for the student council play she had been planning for but seemed to have a change of heart about the act she performed on a regular basis. I had no idea what she had done with Koito-san while I was unaware but Touko seemed to have become...weaker.

That might not be the best way to phrase it, but it was what I saw. She no longer hid her weakness from others, as though all the fractured aspects of her heart had become one. In exchange, Touko spent more time looking down, as though she had lost something.

I had a guess as to what it was that Touko had lost.

Touko and Koito-san.

Though I knew it deep down, I didn't want things to end without my ever making a move.

At some point, Touko had said this to me: *When you're here, I feel like I'm approaching the ideal version of myself.* As long as she had Saeki Sayaka standing beside her or following behind her, she felt she could keep going.

I had been happy to hear those words. But...if Touko's ideals had changed, then what did that mean for me?

When I took a sip of the cooling tea, the battered windows quivered slightly. A cold wind slipped in from somewhere, caressing me through my clothes.

Ah, I thought. The season, or at least the day, is coming to an end. As I looked out the window to check, the scenery and my memories seemed to sink, as though they were drowning in an ocean of light.

In the middle of our school trip in early autumn, the day I had anticipated for so long finally came. I looked it right in the eyes, and Touko was before me when I did.

She looked straight at me, but her expression was pained, as if she wanted to turn her gaze away.

"Touko."

"Don't do it, Sayaka." Touko's voice was weak as she tried to

dissuade me. “I’m not the amazing person you think I am.”

I had known that for a long time, of course. But the Touko here, right now, was already amazing in her own way. She was magnificent and beautiful.

Up until this point, she had been guided by the change that Koito-san had brought about. But starting now, I would be the one to move.

I took a step towards the true Touko.

“I love you.”

When I became a high school student, I resolved not to make the same mistakes again. As long as I knew why I had gone wrong before, I thought that I could prevent it from happening again.

I thought I already knew everything there was about loving someone.

But I only truly learned what that meant after I met *her* .

Parallel Lines

I WONDER IF IT'S TRUE that no one is perfect.

I certainly couldn't find any faults in Nanami Touko, even up close. Her beauty set my mind whirling around. She was perfect to me, and I found myself wanting to stare at her endlessly, just like I was now.

Before she could realize my eyes were on her, I quickly turned my face down toward my desk. What was I doing, right in the middle of class?

That first day after the high school entrance ceremony, I already felt like I was walking on air. It was like the bright sunlight of spring was bathing my heart, warm and fragrant. Nanami Touko. She possessed beautiful black hair and eyes that shone a brilliant blue when the light hit them just right. I couldn't have been the only one to be spellbound by her beautiful face.

I was incredibly lucky that I ended up in the same class as her just as I was starting my new life. When the school day ended, Nanami Touko came by my desk.

"How about we head over right away?"

When she asked me that without any explanation, I almost asked her *to where*, but then I realized I knew what she meant. "To the student council?"

"Yeah. Are you busy?"

I felt like she was asking me those questions out of order. But I had no reason to turn down Nanami Touko's invitation.

"Now is fine."

I got my things together a little more quickly than usual, and we left the classroom together. The air in the shaded hallway was slightly cold. Now, were we going up or down?

"Which floor is the student council room on?"

"They said it's not in the school building," Nanami Touko explained as she went to the stairs. I wasn't sure what she meant, so I obediently followed her. When I was by Nanami Touko's side, I ended up so nervous that I was worried my shoulders might visibly stiffen up.

We changed into our outdoor shoes at the shoe cubbies and left

the school building. Just when I thought we would be going to a different school building, based on the way she'd phrased things earlier, she turned her back to me and started walking in the opposite direction. There was something like a trail that continued ahead of where Nanami Touko walked, an unpaved path between the trees. The path led us toward the hill next to the school, the surrounding greenery increasing as we went. I looked to the right and left, searching for our destination.

"We *are* going to the student council room, right?"

"Yeah, it's supposed to be in a separate building."

"Ah..."

What an odd student council. This seemed inconvenient for the times they would need to check in with the faculty.

As we progressed down the path that ran parallel to the outside of the school building, it opened up right behind the school. I could hear fewer voices, and as the dense landscape deepened, I felt more and more of a sense of *déjà vu*. When I thought about where I had seen this before, I realized it reminded me of a very familiar place indeed.

"It's like the garden at home." I commented without thinking as we walked and then gasped at myself. Nanami Touko's eyes went wide as she looked at me. Then, her gaze swept through the surrounding scene before coming back to my face.

"Saeki-san, is your family rich?" Nanami Touko asked me, curiosity sparkling in her eyes. I didn't understand why she was so interested in knowing.

Rich, eh?

"Well, I suppose you could say that."

"Oh, is it one of those things where you would be in trouble if you told anyone?" My less than stellar response prompted further speculation from Nanami Touko.

"No, not particularly... Actually, how exactly would that get me in trouble?" I couldn't phrase it right, so I just ended up sounding skeptical.

Nanami Touko shone as bright as sunlight as she said, "You know, like a job you would get in trouble for if others knew about it."

"What kind of job is that...?" I couldn't help chuckling a little at her unexpectedly childish idea. Nanami Touko seemed slightly embarrassed and averted her eyes, possibly because of my laughter. We walked in silence for a bit until I managed to get my thoughts

together.

“We have a large garden at home and a helper who comes by.”

“Wow.”

“And we have two cats.”

“That’s nice.”

“But it’s not as though I myself worked to make any of that happen. I think that’s why I don’t particularly want to talk about it.”

“Hm.”

I couldn’t claim something as a status symbol if I hadn’t earned it for myself. And it didn’t make sense for anyone to praise me for it, either. But Nanami Touko seemed to think differently.

“You can’t get rich without working hard, so if your family is rich, that must mean that *someone* in your family worked hard, right? I think I would be proud of that.”

This time, it was my turn to exclaim in wonder at her. It had never occurred to me to think of it that way.

“You must really care about your family,” I commented, guessing based on her tone. Nanami Touko seemed to freeze for a moment.

“Well, as much as a normal person would.”

I was a little curious about the forced smile she wore as she answered. ...No, I suppose there wasn’t a single thing about Nanami Touko that I wasn’t curious about.

We had peered into each other’s lives a bit, and maybe it caught both of us off guard. Neither of us spoke after that until we caught sight of the student council room, only our demure footsteps sounding out one after another among the trees. During that time, I glanced at Nanami Touko’s profile and marveled once again at her beauty. I was relieved she didn’t meet my eye.

Eventually, we approached the hill, and as the nature around us deepened, we caught sight of the building. A Japanese-style roof and rhododendrons greeted us, along with the entryway that sported a small placard reading *Student Council Room* .

As we came in, I noticed a bench behind the building. The hush all around it made the place feel like a retreat that had been set up in the back of the woods.

“The building looks quite old.”

Made from wood plank walls in this day and age, its architecture

was simple and straightforward. It felt as though it would collapse with a slight push.

“I heard it used to be the calligraphy club’s room.”

“I see...”

Memories of my old calligraphy lessons flooded back to me. I remember being highly praised when I wrote characters by mimicking my teacher’s copybook. At the time, that sort of thing was one of my strong suits.

“Seems like there’ll be a lot of bugs.” Seeing the many-colored flowers in bloom and the overflowing nature all around the place, I couldn’t help making a grim prediction.

“Can’t stand bugs?”

“I’m not sure there are any people who *can* stand them.”

“Agreed.”

Nanami Touko smiled drily. *So she doesn’t like bugs*. I felt like I had finally seen a side to Nanami Touko that was human. Everything else about her seemed entirely too carefully curated, though not in a bad way.

“Please excuse our intrusion.” Nanami Touko went in first. I repeated the same words and followed in after her.

The inside of the room seemed just as archaic as the outside. A long table had been placed in the center, and the smell of dry trees wafted up from the floors. The walls to either side of us sported large windows that let all the sunlight in, filling every last nook and cranny with brightness.

A group comprised of two boys and one girl surrounded that long table. I think they must have all been upperclassmen.

“We came to join.”

“To join? Not to observe?”

The girl with short hair, who I could tell was an upperclassman by the color of the ribbon on her chest, opened her eyes wide.

“If that’s all right.”

“Looks like we’ve got some real motivated newbies. Why don’t you take a seat for now?” The boy sitting in the middle gestured at the seats across from him. A light-haired boy sitting across from him moved chairs to clear a space for us.

“Sorry to trouble you.”

“No worries.”

He gave us a good-natured smile and sat down beside the other upperclassmen. The three of them faced the two of us, almost like we were in an interview. In fact, I suppose that's exactly what it was.

"I'm Kuze. I'm a second year," the boy in the middle introduced himself. "And he's a second year, and she's a second year, too," he added, indicating the remaining two members. Then, as if predicting that we would be wondering why there weren't any third years, he went straight into an explanation. "When the new school year starts, most of the third years retire, since the election happens in May and all."

"The student council election?"

"Yeah."

That's so soon, I thought. First years presumably got to vote too, but wouldn't we start out not really knowing much about the school?

"Although you won't see much of this upperclassman either, even though he hasn't retired," the black-haired upperclassman interjected. The upperclassman named Kuze winced awkwardly.

"How could you tell them that? Ugh...I know it's true, but still," Kuze-senpai admitted. Laughing, the black-haired upperclassman stood up as Kuze continued to protest. "I'm in the kendo club too, and things get pretty busy over there, okay?"

"And yet he still has it in his head to try becoming student council president anyway."

With that explanation, the upperclassman brought over two coffee mugs. She placed one in front of me and one in front of Nanami Touko. The steam and fragrance wafted off the liquid as she poured it into the mugs.

"I'm sorry, we shouldn't be having an upperclassman serve us like this."

"Don't worry about it. I'm just happy to have some charming new underclassmen."

"Thank you very much."

Accepting the mug, Nanami Touko held it as though she were cradling it. As she waited for it to cool, she asked, "So do you think you'll be elected as student council president?"

"Depends on who the other candidates are. If no one else is really motivated, then it could happen." Kuze-senpai smiled, as though he was banking on that. Nanami Touko's eyes narrowed as if to say, *I want it too*.

“Our school tends to be pretty passionate about events like this, though. It might end up being pretty tough this year.”

“Events, you say...” Nanami Touko’s reaction seemed to hint at something. I glanced at her curiously, wondering what about that had caught her attention. She smiled ambiguously, almost as though she might have noticed my gaze, and then brought the cup to her lips.

“I forgot to ask—cream or sugar?” the upperclassman asked.

Nanami Touko thought for a moment and then answered, “Two creams, please.”

I decided to memorize Nanami Touko’s request. If I was going to join the student council, such information would probably be useful on many occasions. Then the upperclassman’s eyes turned to me.

“And you...?”

“My name is Saeki.”

“What about you, Saeki-san?”

“Black is fine, thank you.” I preferred my coffee unsweetened.

“So you want to join the student council too, Saeki-san?”

Before I answered, I glanced at Nanami Touko. When I saw her nod slightly, I made up my mind, too. “Yes.”

“Two new members out of nowhere! Seriously, what a huge relief. Things are gonna be so much easier now!”

As I observed Kuze-senpai’s excitement, I privately decided not to vote for him.

“If things are easier on everyone else, then I don’t have to worry about you guys so much, right?” he added. “See, it works out for everyone.”

“Well, putting that aside...” One of the upperclassmen cut him off briskly, while the other male upperclassman watched their exchange in silence. “We basically do something every day after school. If you don’t have any other plans, please come by.”

“Okay. Oh, but I might not be able to stay for long on the days I have lessons.”

“What are you studying?” It was Nanami Touko who asked me that, not one of the upperclassman.

“*Ikebana*. Flower arrangement.”

“Ooh!” For some reason, she clapped briefly. Maybe my answer lived up to her expectations.

“But I used to take a lot of other lessons, too.”

There had been piano, calligraphy, swimming. I hadn't really stuck with any of them long enough to claim mastery, though. And it wasn't just my lessons that tended to end prematurely.

Glancing discreetly at Nanami Touko, I wondered whether I would be able to carry things through to the end this time.

Nanami held the coffee creamers without opening them as she looked around the student council room. It was as though she were searching for something, her eyes scanning evenly from the ceiling to the floor.

What kind of ties did Nanami Touko feel to the student council? Was there something specific she wanted to do, or did the student council itself mean something to her?

There still wasn't much I knew about Nanami Touko. Perhaps that was why she seemed perfect in my eyes.

In which case... I wondered if she would still seem just as beautiful to me if I knew everything there was to know about her.

After we finished our business at the student council, I walked back to the school gate with Nanami Touko.

"I feel like I'm going to get lost until I learn my way around here," I murmured.

"Me, too." Nanami Touko turned around. "I'll call you if I get lost, so make sure to come rescue me, okay?"

I gave a snort of laughter at Nanami Touko's joke. "Unfortunately, I generally don't answer calls unless I recognize the phone number."

"Oh, right. We haven't exchanged numbers yet."

Nanami Touko pulled out her phone and showed it to me. A little flustered, I retrieved my phone from my bag as well. Under the faint sunlight streaming through the trees, alongside the shadows that wavered with the wind, our fingers and voices crossed.

As I showed her the phone number I had finished entering, Nanami Touko smiled. "Now it'll be a number you recognize."

"I'll definitely come and rescue you, then."

I was sure I would come running right away—though I hoped she wouldn't notice I was out of breath when it happened.

When we reached the gate, we heard the lively voices of the other students who had finished with their clubs. Bicycles weaved through the crowd, and people's shadows spread across the ground

like water. Nanami Touko and I added to the pool of shadows. The stark silhouette of her head swam unreliably, wavering with her long hair.

“Which way is your house, Saeki-san?” She gestured to the right and left. I pointed at the same time as Nanami Touko—in the exact opposite directions.

“Looks like we’re headed opposite ways.”

“Right.”

Oh, well.

We parted, and I headed toward home. It took a while before the pounding of my heart was overtaken by the sound of my footsteps.

I commuted by train when I was in junior high, and I had lied to my parents that I had come to dislike doing so. But now that I had started walking home instead, it was a lot easier than I thought it would be. Maybe it wasn’t really that much of a lie, after all.

Arriving home, I wondered how Nanami Touko would respond if she were to see the elegant gate and outer wall, such a stark contrast to the run-down student council. Thinking back to her reactions, she might actually be more excited about the cats.

I heard one of those very cats meow, and peeked into the shadow of the gate’s pillar. The tortoiseshell cat was curled up there, as though carrying the shadow on its back. It noticed me, and our eyes met.

“I’m home.”

When I greeted it, it slowly got up and headed towards the garden. Though we had two cats, I rarely saw them together. It seemed they each had their own lives, in which they did not fight or meddle with each other. I wondered if the only commonality between them was their fondness for my grandparents, who looked after them.

After I followed the cat for a while, I found my grandmother in the garden. It really did bear a resemblance to the tree-lined road to the student council room.

“Hello, I’m home.”

“Mm.”

When I greeted her, my grandmother gave me a curt nod. She stooped to pick up the cat that approached her, staggering a little as she straightened. My grandmother’s back and posture hadn’t ever weakened before, but lately she had been starting to show her age a little. However, her sharp voice and attitude were still going strong.

“Was school fun?”

“Yes...”

Was it showing on my face that much? When she guessed that much just from the slight greeting I had given her, I started to feel embarrassed. Evidently, though, that wasn't what my grandmother had been looking at.

“I could tell from the way you were moving.”

“The way I was moving?” When I found out it wasn't my face, I checked my elbows and knees instead.

“You were moving as though you were motivated.” And just like that, my grandmother left with the cat, not bothering to tell me whether it was a good or bad thing.

“Motivated...” I muttered to myself as I moved my arms up and down. I didn't feel like I was moving particularly faster. “And here I thought I was already living a fairly motivated life.”

My grandmother's statements were often unique and occasionally difficult to follow. But if she was saying that, I trusted that there was a note of truth to it. Perhaps my meeting Nanami Touko was such a strong motivator that even people observing from the sidelines could see it. I hoped that Nanami Touko herself couldn't see through that, though.

At any rate, I decided to apply that motivation towards the student council for the time being. Until I knew what Nanami Touko sought from the student council, my path ahead was clear.

After a week went by, social groups had more or less formed within the class. As though we were drawn to each other by some affinity, I ended up eating with two friends during lunch. It was odd, considering that our seats were not currently near each other according to Japanese alphabetical order.

“Whoa, your leftovers from yesterday look so pretty packed in there.”

“Isn't that a little too much konyaku?”

“No one at home really likes it, so it all ends up as leftovers.”

“Then why even make it for dinner in the first place...?”

Whether chatting or poking fun at one another, my friends harmonized together well. Yoshida Manaka and Igarashi Midori. Yoshida-san was the one with too much konyaku, and Igarashi-san was the one who had none.

Yoshida-san was cheerful, to the point where her remarks were so distinctive that I was beginning to suspect that she didn't really think before she talked. Igarashi-san was often exasperated with Yoshida-san for this reason, but they were generally always together during lunch breaks. They got along very well, and it seemed to me as though they were very close friends, so I assumed perhaps they had known each other a long time.

"Were you together in junior high?" I asked.

The pair looked at each other.

"Not at all."

"We only met after getting to high school."

"Really..."

It didn't seem that way to me at all. I suppose they were just a natural match. I guess that knowing someone for a long time doesn't automatically mean you'll get along that much better, then. So maybe the opposite is true, like when two streams converge and mingle immediately.

"Other kids have asked us that, too. Does it really seem like we've known each other that long?"

When Yoshida-san tried getting confirmation, Igarashi-san's eyes wandered away for a moment. "Maybe we seem close to other people because you have zero filter."

"Hmm... Well, it can't be a bad thing that people think we're friends, right?" Yoshida-san said lightly and started poking at her konyaku with her chopsticks.

Igarashi-san glanced at Yoshida-san and returned to the earlier topic. What was it again...? Right, we had been talking about what clubs we were joining.

"So, I was thinking about joining that one English conversation club."

"Whooooa, conva-sation," Yoshida-san interjected, with her characteristic loud-mouthed drawl. I'd never had friends with a personality like hers before, so when Yoshida-san spoke, I sometimes didn't know how to react.

Igarashi-san didn't bother engaging with her response. "If I'm going to join a club anyway, I thought I might as well join one like that. There's no point joining a sports team, since it's not like I'm going to become a pro anyway."

"You think so? But if you exercise enough, you'll be ready if

something happens and you need to make a quick getaway.”

“What exactly would I be running from?”

“Uhh, well...lemme see...” Yoshida-san’s chopsticks paused as she clutched her head in serious contemplation.

Igarashi-san’s eyes narrowed. “Never mind that.”

“O-Okay.” Yoshida-san readily abandoned her bewilderment. I kept eating while the two of them talked, occasionally nodding along in agreement. In that time, Igarashi-san picked up a piece of Yoshida-san’s konyaku with a look of feigned confusion.

“What’re you talking about? It’s delicious.”

“Sayaka, do you have any major dislikes?”

Unable to think of a comeback, Yoshida-san turned the conversation to me. When Yoshida-san first asked me my name, she started using my first name within three minutes of conversation. Igarashi-san had followed suit and started calling me Sayaka, too. Maybe they became so close because that sense of camaraderie was a given for them.

Putting that aside—things I dislike?

Questions like that, I was tempted to answer.

“Let me think...” For a moment, I thought of the face of my Senpai from my junior high school days. A bitter taste grew at the back of my mouth. “Irresponsible people, perhaps.”

“I see, so people like me?” For some reason, she snickered like she was proud of herself.

“So you do have *some* self-awareness.”

“I guess.” Igarashi-san’s words didn’t seem to faze her. She merrily resumed eating, as though all her worries had been resolved. ...I wonder what she’d decided she might be running from in the end. Me, maybe?

The sound of the classroom door opening drew my attention, and when I looked over, my legs froze under my desk. Nanami Touko was there. She had just come into the classroom, looking as though she had finished wrapping up some business. Just as she was about to return to her seat, Yoshida-san turned to her.

“Why don’t you eat with us too, Touko?”

I was worried that my surprise might reveal itself on my face.

Huh? I narrowly swallowed my voice before an exclamation of surprise escaped. Yoshida-san had airily—almost flippantly—called

out to stop Nanami Touko. On top of that, she even used the other girl's first name. Nanami Touko didn't seem bothered by it as she came over to us. Though I knew this was just Yoshida-san's personality, I was still surprised that she acted that way even with Nanami Touko.

"All right. But I'm not sure where to sit..."

Nanami Touko glanced around. There were no empty seats nearby whatsoever, and her own chair was a little too far away to drag over. Our eyes met, and when she gave me a sheepish smile, I worried a little that my face might turn red.

"Oh, then how about we do this?" Yoshida-san spoke up as though she had struck upon a particularly good idea, so Igarashi-san and I looked on with trepidation. Yoshida-san stood from her seat and started pushing on Igarashi-san's shoulder. As Igarashi-san scowled and said, "Excuse me, what are you doing?" Yoshida pushed the girl partway out of her seat and fit herself in the remaining half.

"Okay, we've got an open seat for you now." She presented the seat that she had been sitting in up until that moment to Nanami Touko.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. It's kind of fun."

"No, it isn't."

Igarashi-san shoved Yoshida-san's shoulder, showing her discontent. Nanami Touko smiled wryly but sat down without further resistance, to my surprise. "Don't mind if I do, then."

"Have you been friends with Nanami-san for a while?" I asked Yoshida-san as she gave a satisfied grin.

"Mmm, yeah. About a week now."

Then they had only just met since we started high school.

"Sorry, Midori." Nanami Touko gave Igarashi-san a small apology.

"You're not the one who should be apologizing, Touko." Igarashi-san gave Yoshida-san's face a little prod.

Yoshida-san, meanwhile, seemed to be enjoying her experience sitting on half a chair. "This really exercises your stomach muscles!"

Midori... As I worried over that, it took me a moment to notice Nanami Touko's gaze on me. "Is something wrong?" I asked. She was peeking at my lunch box, leaving her own unopened. Her eyes were wide and looked a bit like a child's.

“I was just a little curious about your lunch, Saeki-san.”

“Huh? ...Oh.”

I understood why. It probably had to do with our conversation about my family.

“It’s normal. See?”

I showed my half-eaten lunch to her. Nanami Touko’s eyes carefully took in my side dishes and rice. But her eyes didn’t glitter, and her mouth remained slack. Maybe it wasn’t living up to her expectations.

“Looks good.”

“What exactly were you hoping it would look like?”

When I asked Nanami Touko that, she smiled and pulled away without replying, evidently too embarrassed to tell me her silly fantasies. I wondered if the rich weren’t supposed to eat rolled omelets in their lunch. Personally, I would want to have rolled omelets whether I was rich or not.

That aside...why were we still only calling each other Saeki-san and Nanami-san when she was on a first-name, no-honorific basis with the others? Something about that bothered me. Was I falling behind?

Though I was probably pursuing Nanami Touko in a different way from the rest.

Still, Yoshida-san and Igarashi-san were able to have an unconstrained conversation with Nanami Touko. This distressed me. I fretted over whether to call her Touko like the others. I didn’t think she would be upset if I did, but I was sure she would think it was abrupt.

It was like suddenly jumping into something new, and that was just too difficult for me. I wasn’t good at letting my guard down. My thoughts whirled as I moved my hands and mouth mechanically, and ate without tasting much of my lunch.

When lunch ended, I tried to naturally call out to Nanami Touko as she stood up.

“To—”

“Hm?” Nanami Touko turned around. When we made eye contact, my voice withered away.

“Nothing.”

“Really? All right.” Nanami Touko returned to her seat without questioning me further.

“Aha.”

When I heard someone’s insinuating voice from the side, I turned my head sharply. “What?”

Yoshida-san proudly pointed at me with her konyaku still picked up in her chopsticks. She hadn’t finished her lunch yet? “So you’re not used to calling people by their first names.”

When she saw through me, I couldn’t immediately deny her. Yoshida-san and Igarashi-san looked at each other and came to some mutual understanding.

“So that’s how it is.”

“Seems like it.”

“Like what?” I understood that their remarks were about me. But I couldn’t understand what conclusion they had reached. “What kind of impression do you get from me?”

“Huh? Uhh, that you’re pretty.”

Igarashi-san narrowed her eyes slightly at that. Was Yoshida-san complimenting me? It occurred to me that they were still both sitting in the same chair.

“Thank you,” I said, although that wasn’t what I had wanted her to tell me...at least, I think.

“Then how about you use me for practice?” Yoshida-san, who had crossed her arms and stretched herself to her full sitting height, looked at me expectantly.

“Practice what?”

“Isn’t it easier talking to me than to Touko? I figure that’s how it is.”

I still wasn’t sure what she was implying, but I could at least hazard a guess this time. To be honest, I wasn’t very good with people who were so casual about getting familiar with me. But those negative feelings hadn’t developed in my conversations with Yoshida Manaka. Maybe it was because she did it so naturally and clearly without ulterior motives.

And so, I didn’t think about it too deeply as I said, “Manaka.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh.” She seemed satisfied.

“Do me next.” Even Igarashi-san was asking me now. I felt equally comfortable talking to her, so that was fine.

“Midori.”

“Yo, she’s da bomb!” Midori exclaimed.

She seemed happy... I felt like rather than us getting closer, their reactions had strengthened their bonds with each other.

“Oh, I should have said that,” Yoshida Manaka—I mean, Manaka interjected.

“Because you’re Yo-she-da?”

“Yo, she’s da bomb.” Manaka nodded happily.

Igarashi Midori—that is, Midori, commented tersely, “Simpleton.”

“Oh, come ooon...” Manaka protested. “There aren’t really any other good Yoshida puns.”

“That’s not the issue. Just hurry up and finish eating, will you?” Midori pointed at the corner of the lunch box. There were two konyaku pieces left.

“Okay, okay.” Stuffing her mouth with konyaku, Manaka looked at me. “Wait a second, you didn’t have any trouble saying that at all.”

“I never said I couldn’t do it.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Manaka easily agreed. Then she swallowed everything in her mouth and nodded firmly. “I hope you become close,” she added with a smile that didn’t seem to have any deep meaning to it.

“Me, too...”

I wondered if we weren’t close now. If we were, what exactly would prove it?

“I’m sooo sick of konyaku.”

“You’ve only got one more, just eat it all in one bite.”

“Okay, then open wide.”

“Why me?”

The chattering pair were the most boisterous in the classroom. I certainly didn’t have anything like the familiar relationship that Manaka and Midori had with each other. If anything, they were probably outliers for already being so close after just a week, so they weren’t exactly a helpful example. It was unlikely that Nanami Touko and I would bond in the same way.

When it came down to it, I had simply fallen for Nanami Touko at first sight. I had been walking on air ever since, but my calmer side would bring me back down to earth soon enough. Though I had been so attracted to her that I forgot to consider that, Nanami Touko and I were both girls.

To the rest of the world, that would surely be an unusual relationship.

I closed my eyes, listening to the distant-sounding voices of my two friends joking around. My troubles and hardships came rushing back all at once, jostling their way into my mind.

“What’s up with this new student test? We already got tested when we got in.”

I listened quietly as Manaka complained.

“Some people might’ve only gotten the grade they did in the entrance exam because of luck,” Midori retorted calmly.

Manaka took in Midori’s gaze and pouted. “Why were you looking at me as you said that?”

“Didn’t you say so yourself a while ago?”

“Oh, yeah, maybe,” Manaka admitted. Then, she turned the conversation to me. “I bet you get good test grades, Sayaka.”

I wondered where she got that idea from. I didn’t think I’d done anything to give that impression just yet.

“I’m not sure about that. We haven’t taken any here yet, after all.” I tried to be modest, but the truth was that I did have a fair amount of confidence in myself. I could apply just the right amount of effort to what I needed to do, just like I did in junior high school. Normally, that was enough to yield good results.

It was just that I hadn’t managed to do what I needed to during the entrance exams.

“.....”

In the next week, all of the new students would be taking a simple exam. We had only recently started classes, so perhaps it really was a sort of extension of the entrance exam, just as Manaka and Midori said.

Nanami Touko had been the highest scorer on the entrance exam. That much was obvious, since she was the new student representative charged with giving opening remarks at the school entrance ceremony. Before I met Nanami Touko, I felt something like humiliation over not scoring highest. Those feelings blurred away the moment I saw her for the first time. But now that there was more distance between me and that first moment, my competitive edge was flaring up again. My confidence that I had a decent knack for doing well in school was coming back.

Unlike during the entrance exams, the same amount of time had passed for both of us since we started school. I would even go so far as to say that our experiences were quite similar so far. We were in the same classroom, taking classes at the same time periods, and both working at the student council after school. I was no further or closer to first place than Nanami Touko. There was no way a pure contest of our abilities wouldn't excite me.

As I contemplated all this, Nanami Touko herself came over to me, holding her bag. "Are you still going to student council today? I know we have exams soon."

To be honest, I would have preferred to hurry home so I could review for the exam. But since the conditions between Nanami Touko and I were so similar right now, I wanted to stay synced with her to the end.

"If you're going, then I suppose I will too, Nanami-san."

"Then let's go." Nanami Touko showed no trace of enthusiasm about the exams. I wondered if she was just that unworried about them.

"You guys don't seem worried at all," Manaka teased us lightly.

"Of course we are." Nanami Touko refuted. Her elegant smile didn't give any indication of her real feelings on the matter.

"Not like I'd study even if I went straight home, anyway," Manaka conceded listlessly as we left the classroom behind. Once we were in the hallway, Nanami Touko turned to me.

"Saeki-san, do you go to the library before exams or anything?"

"I study at home. I feel more relaxed that way."

"That's amazing." It felt strange to receive such ready praise from Nanami Touko. "I feel like I might slack off if I try to study alone in my room," she added.

"Surely not." It was so hard to imagine her that way that I chuckled a little. Whenever I saw her doing student council work, I could tell she was a diligent worker.

Or maybe it was just that she got good results without even trying. Maybe she really was just perfect. Maybe she had no weaknesses at all.

Now that *can't be true*, I thought, but I couldn't quite disprove it either.

As we walked together, I felt uncertain. What were these unstable feelings? I was torn between both wanting to lose and

wanting to win all at once, strange emotions pulling me in opposite directions.

As my anxiety and hope towards Nanami Touko intermingled, I decided that once I returned home, I would devote all of my brainpower to studying for the exam. I had been negligent in my studies during the latter half of my third year in junior high, so this was a good opportunity to turn things around.

Time passed, and we took the new student test, the much-awaited first exam of my high school career. And when the results were posted out in the hallway...

"Whoa, you came in second? That's amazing." Manaka peeked at the postings over my shoulder as she praised my results.

The names of all the new students lined up neatly on the right.

My name was second.

"I'm not first."

I couldn't tell whether the words that slipped from my mouth were expressing dissatisfaction or simply stating the truth before my eyes. I kept on looking at the names from within the hustle and bustle of the crowd.

Saeki Sayaka was second place.

And Nanami Touko was first.

I had lost, openly.

"You didn't lose by many points. But it just feels natural that Touko would come in first."

"Oh, that's not true." Nanami Touko, who had come up beside me at some point, modestly brought her hands together behind her back.

Manaka put her head on my shoulder (such a nuisance) and let the point of her chin dig into me as she spoke. "You act all cool about it, but did you study a ton?"

"Not really. I was too busy with student council."

As Touko smiled and denied it, I listened to her in silence. I knew that there hadn't been that much work to be done in the student council.

"Just kidding. No, the truth is that I studied plenty, of course." Touko immediately rescinded her initial response, and then she turned to me. "I won this time."

Her smiling declaration was so free of ill will that my frustration faded into the background. Abruptly, my shoulders relaxed. "This isn't the first time, though. I lost to you in the entrance exams, too."

"The entrance exams? Oh, to be the new student representative?"

I nodded once. "This can't be good for my confidence."

But despite my negative words, my heart wasn't in as dark of a place as I'd expected. If anything, I think it felt bright, because I was looking at Nanami Touko.

"Well, it was tough for me, too. I think I probably studied even more than you did, Saeki-san." Nanami Touko didn't seem to be trying to tiptoe around my feelings, so she was probably telling me the truth.

Maybe she didn't want people to think she got to the top without working for it. Of course Nanami Touko needed to put in effort, just like anyone else.

"Right...I'm sure that must have been it."

I liked that she didn't show how hard she strived on the surface. In a way, it reminded me of the moment when she captured my gaze as she gallantly strode up to the stage during the entrance ceremony.

"So, why've you been so quiet this whole time, Midori?" Manaka poked Midori next to her.

Midori was scowling, obviously unhappy. "I never thought I'd score lower than you."

"That's so mean."

It certainly was surprising that Manaka was in a relatively high position, and Midori was a ways behind her. Especially since Manaka normally acted the airhead. Perhaps her behavior didn't actually reflect how she was on the inside.

I was sure that Nanami Touko's inner and outer beauty were aligned.

To be honest, I hadn't expected to lose again. Some part of me thought that if we starting running at the same time, I would take the lead when it came to studying. But Nanami Touko easily overtook me.

The distance between us wasn't great, but I had a vivid view of her back.

Oh, how lovely, I found myself thinking.

Though I would do all I could in order to keep from losing again next time, I suspected that, deep down, I didn't want Nanami Touko to lose to me, either. My wishes were contradictory, but that was exactly

what I hoped for from her.

For example, if Nanami Touko had wound up in last place and still smiled like this, would I find her just as charming nonetheless? When I imagined that, I felt like something that stood inside me was about to come crashing down.

I sought something flawless from Nanami Touko. I wanted something that was simply beautiful, that I would hesitate to even touch.

I looked up again at Nanami Touko, who stood in first place. That was the name that ought to be before mine. If it were behind me, I wondered whether I could keep looking up to her.

I wasn't confident that I could keep loving a weaker Nanami Touko. Not yet.

"They really haven't come yet."

When my female upperclassman said that, I agreed with a sigh. "No sign of them at all."

"I've been stuck with all the work since I was a first year because of them."

Whenever we were working in the student council room, the two boys were missing. Kuze-senpai was never around, and we didn't see the other male upperclassman very often, either. At present, the student council was essentially run by three people.

"Things are going to be tough for you in the coming year, too."

"I'll just tell myself that it's a challenge worth overcoming."

The upperclassman smiled at my rephrasing, flashing her white teeth. "Really, you're such a good girl, Sayaka-chan."

Sayaka-chan.

"....."

I would get used to it little by little, I thought. Then, eventually, it would become so natural that I wouldn't feel a thing.

Humans are creatures of convenience.

"Come to think of it, is Touko taking today off?" For some reason, she didn't add a - *chan* to Nanami Touko's name, though I did have a feeling as to why.

"She had something to do...but she said she would come as soon as it was over."

Leaving behind that message, Nanami Touko had quickly left the

classroom. Since she wasn't involved in any clubs except student council, I wondered what other business she had at school. I'd been mulling it over since getting to the student council room, but I couldn't think of many possibilities.

The clouds spread throughout the sky like white-capped waves, and the sun was dim, as though it had sunk into the bottom of the ocean. The faint light didn't even come through the large windows of the student council room, though at least it wasn't raining. Despite this weather, the air felt slightly humid, and I could feel on my skin that May was approaching.

After a while, Nanami Touko arrived just as we were wrapping up most of the day's work.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, taking a seat next to me. I stood up from my seat as she did so, poured a cup of tea, and handed it to her.

"Thank you."

"Did you finish what you needed to do?"

"I did." Nanami Touko's voice seemed a bit sad, which caught my attention at once. She noticed my gaze right away and quickly tried to play it off. "It's nothing."

"All right. If you say so..."

Maybe it was something she couldn't tell me. Once again, I felt like I could almost see the distance between us.

We weren't that busy that day, so there was no work left for Nanami to do by the time she came in late. Once we drank the tea and took a break for a bit, our upperclassman told us we could head home.

"I'll lock up, too."

"Thanks very much." Nanami Touko bowed her head and left the student council room. *Here we go.* I followed behind her on my slightly stiff legs.

We had finished student council work. In my mind, this was where the biggest challenge began. I had been thinking of telling her that day if she showed up. Now that she had, I couldn't run away.

If I fell behind someone else, all I could do was try to catch up. And, if other people could do it, I could do it, too.

I at least had that much confidence in myself.

"Nanami-san, could I have a moment?" I called out to Nanami Touko, who had gone outside before me and was standing around. For some reason, she jumped slightly.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

“I should ask you the same question. Are you all right?” I didn’t think that we had the kind of relationship where she would be frightened if I just called out to her.

“Sorry, it just surprised me because I was spacing out a little. Did you need something?”

“I wanted to talk to you for a moment.”

“Hmm...okay.”

For some reason, Nanami Touko’s response was hesitant, as though she were on guard. That worried me, but we would never get to the topic at hand if I kept pressing the subject, so I turned to the bench behind the student council building.

The busy scene of the forest spread out in front of the old bench, which was positioned as if leaning back against the student council room. There was so much going on in the scenery that I didn’t feel as relaxed as I’d hoped. We placed our bags between us, setting up a carefully defined distance.

“So, what is it? A confession?”

Though I knew it was a joke, I was at a loss for words. My vision nearly started to swim.

“The way you said you wanted to talk just set that kind of mood, that’s all.”

Nanami Touko was smiling at first, but once she saw my face, her smile faded. I wondered how strange my face must have looked like in that moment. I wanted to know, but I also didn’t want to see it.

“Sorry. Was it something serious you wanted to talk about?”

Following the cue of Nanami Touko’s calm voice, the thumping of my heart gradually withdrew. Nature was spread out before my eyes, so I breathed in the fresh air.

“I’m not sure if it’s serious...well, yes, I suppose I’m going to say this seriously.”

“Okay. Then I’ll listen to you seriously.”

Nanami Touko turned her body towards me. But when she acted that formally about it, it made it all the harder to say. I was sure what I was about to say wasn’t that big of a deal at all, but it was just enough to make me sweat slightly.

I propped the palm of my hand on the bench and leaned in.

“Can I call you Touko?”

The joints of my bent fingers felt warm.

“Well, sure...” Nanami Touko’s response was nonchalant. Silence fell, as though she was waiting to hear more. When she realized there was nothing else coming, she tilted her head. “Is that it?”



“...Yes, I suppose so.” I couldn’t deny that I was making a big deal out of it. Still, it was important to me.

Then, for some reason, Nanami Touko—I mean, Touko—slumped over slightly. “You *were* serious.” She pressed her fingers together in front of her nose, forming a triangle that covered her mouth, as her shoulders quivered.

...Is she laughing ?

“Was there something funny about that?”

“No, you didn’t say anything strange. It’s just that you were so serious about it, Saeki-san.”

“That’s just the way I am.”

Despite her explanation, I was embarrassed that Touko was laughing at me. I couldn’t just casually slide something like that into the natural flow of conversation. I grappled with things one at a time. I had always built things up like this, so that was the only way I could do things when it came to Touko, too.

“It’s a good way to be.”

“Thank you.”

I was glad she hadn’t said she *liked* that about me. I didn’t think I would be able to get through the rest of the conversation with a cool head if she had.

“Can I call you Sayaka, too?”

“Yes, of course.”

When Touko said my name so brightly, it felt like the golden light was breaking through the clouds beyond...like something bright and sunny was shining on me, not from the cloudy sky above, but from right beside me.

The light seemed to create an illusion of radiance in the corner of my eyes. I suppose sometimes, depending on the circumstances, people see things that aren’t actually there. But to me, it was like Touko was shining light on me.

“I’m really glad that I invited you to the student council, Sayaka.”

“Thank you.” I felt like she had said that in the past, too. Since she’d brought up the student council, I ventured the question. “Did you join the student council with a specific goal in mind?”

I doubted just being a member was enough to satisfy her. Touko’s eyes shifted, as though she were looking at something far off in the distance.

“A goal... Yes, I do have a goal.” She covered her mouth with her hand like she had earlier, but this time, her shoulders did not move. “If I can, I’d like to start working on it this year, but I’m not sure... I guess it depends on the president.”

“Will you tell me what it is?”

“Um...” She dragged out her response lightly as she took her bag and stood, then finally said, “I can’t talk about it yet. I’ll confide in you about it after we formally become officers, okay?”

Nanami Touko was running away, if only a little. Maybe her feelings about the student council ran deeper than I thought. It might be something she couldn’t very well expose to someone she had only finally started calling by her first name that very day.

Not knowing something important about the person I cared for made me anxious. But if she said that she would talk to me about it eventually, that would have to be good enough for now.

“I understand. Then, I’ll wait for that time to come.”

When I indicated my intent to abandon the topic, Touko’s mouth loosened and quirked up in gratitude. “You’re so kind, Sayaka.”

“That’s not it at all.” I don’t think you could call my self-centered fear of being hated for overstepping into her personal life ‘kindness.’ I was scared, so I would wait by the sidelines until she came to me. I wondered when I had gotten so good at waiting. But this was different from junior high. Back then, the choice to wait wasn’t even up to me in the first place.

It’s different, I repeated in the back of my throat, as though I were trying to convince myself.

Touko held the straps of her bag as she looked intently into the forest.

“Touko?” Though there were many other ways I could have called out to her, I deliberately called her name.

Turning, Touko smiled faintly and told me, “It’s nothing.”

I glanced beyond the trees as I passed by, but all I saw was the color of more tree trunks sprawling out beyond. The person I was at that time couldn’t find anything else to see.

But I would soon find out what Touko had seen there.

One day, I was heading to the student council with Touko as usual.

“Do you hear voices...?”

Interrupting our conversation, Touko glanced around. Then, she started to stray off the path.

As I followed her, wondering what was going on, Touko pressed herself up against the corner of the school building. She stretched out her neck as though she were looking at something, so I came up close behind her to peer around as well. It might have been the first time I had ever been so close to Touko. Inwardly flustered, I followed her gaze.

Between the forest-like grove of trees and the school building, there was a small open space. Since it was protected by the trees, very little sunlight penetrated the shade. A boy and a girl were standing there, close together, as they faced each other.

Was this...a confession?

It wasn't a popular spot, so this might be the perfect location. *They don't need to do it on the school grounds*, I thought, but I suppose school might actually be one of the only places students could reliably meet. Even I got confessed to at school, and I only ever saw her on the school grounds.

At any rate, in our present situation, we were essentially eavesdropping.

"I can't say I approve of this..."

The best course of action would probably be to leave immediately, but Touko and I had already concealed ourselves in the shadows. These two had chosen a place where they wouldn't be seen, and yet here we were watching them. The world was overflowing with people, after all.

Long after the fact, I found myself wondering whether someone might have been watching when Senpai confessed to me, too. Such thoughts of the past made me break out in a cold sweat.

"It's Serizawa," Touko murmured as she looked at the girl.

"Is she in our class?"

"No. But I competed with her in PE the other day."

"What...?"

When did that happen? During PE, she said... Oh, right. I remembered Touko running at the front during marathon training. Come to think of it, there was one other girl who was close behind her the whole time. That must be her. The details became clearer and clearer as my memory revealed itself. The girl had been bold and intense when she was competing, but now her face and eyes were round, giving off the cutest and sweetest vibe she could muster. I

suppose that was natural in this situation.

People have many faces, even if they aren't aware of it. Wearing a face that shone with love, the girl stood intently still as though she were waiting for something.

I couldn't hear what happened after, but judging by the fact that gloom didn't come over the girl's face and the way the two of them left together, I think she must have successfully conveyed her feelings. We kept peering into the space even after it was deserted for a while. Finally Touko urged me, "Let's go," and we ended our little detour.

I knew that it wasn't exactly a popular spot, but that was still a shock. I wondered if I would run into things like this again on my way to the student council in the future.

"I wonder who confessed to who," Touko said in a hushed voice as we walked.

"Based on how they acted, it must have been the girl."

"Serizawa, huh... I wonder if she's in the same club as Ogaki-kun?" Touko put her hand to her chin, nodding thoughtfully. She seemed to know the boy somehow, too.

"He's not in the same class as her?"

"Ogaki-kun is in *our* class."

...Is *he*?

"Right, of course," I mumbled vaguely.

Touko's eyes went round. "I thought you'd be the type to remember these sorts of things, Sayaka."

"It's just that I haven't talked to him before..." I said, making excuses. The truth was, information that didn't interest me wouldn't stay in my head no matter what I did. When it came to Touko, though, I was sure I could remember just about everything. Even how she liked her coffee or what to put in it.

"I wonder if they're going to start dating."

"I'd imagine so."

It was no small matter to be able to respond to a confession on the spot.

"So they're lovers..."

I couldn't help being a little embarrassed to hear the word *lovers* come out of Touko's mouth, even though it had nothing to do with me.

Touko furrowed her brow, as though she couldn't quite accept

her own conclusion. "But isn't it a little soon?"

"Hmm?"

"I mean, it's only been a month since we started school."

I understood this objection, too. You could probably only get to know someone so well after just a month of knowing them. If someone developed feelings for another person after such a short time, it might just mean that they *really* liked how that person looked.

...Not that I was in any position to judge.

"Yes, well..."

On the other hand, you couldn't guarantee that you knew someone well even if you spent an entire year with them. That's just the nature of human relationships.

"It's not like you can be confident that your feelings are certain even after a long time." As I spoke, I felt Touko's gaze on me so intently that I almost stopped talking. "That's what I think at least."

"I see." Touko nodded with exaggerated satisfaction. I felt a little embarrassed about what I'd said. "Does that mean you have some experience in this yourself, Sayaka?"

"I suppose you could say that."

I wondered how Touko would react if I confided in her that an upperclassman who was a girl had confessed to me, and I had dated her. I couldn't imagine getting a positive response, so I buried it deep inside, where no one would ever notice or see it. Still, if I stayed that way forever, I got the feeling that the distance between Touko and I would never change.

"I wonder if we should tell Serizawa later that we saw them."

"Hmm...that's a tough one." If the love had been unrequited, I think it would have been better to pretend we had never seen it, but the confession had apparently had a happy ending. "What do *you* want to do about it, Touko?"

I wasn't particularly close to either of them. It'd be odd for me to go seek them out to tell them that, so it would be better to remain silent in my case. But it seemed that Touko planned to continue to be friends with the girl—Serizawa.

"I was asking you because I don't know what to do."

"Well, if it were me, I wouldn't say anything." I looked at Touko. She looked back at me as if to ask why, so I continued. "If either of them ever wanted to talk to me about it, I'm sure they would approach me in their own time."

That might just be cowardice disguised as perceptiveness, but I did think it would be rude to stick my nose in their business. It was difficult to determine what was correct and which position to take.

If anything, someone like Manaka might actually have a better instinct for what to do in situations like these.

“Sayaka, sometimes you act like an upperclassman,” Touko remarked. So first she thought I was serious, and now she was saying I seemed older, too.

“Are you saying my way of thinking is outdated?”

“I’m saying you’re mature.”

Well, that’s *not true*, I thought, but I didn’t deny it out loud. I knew myself that I couldn’t deal with things as wisely as an adult. Then again, I couldn’t charge straight into things without thinking anymore, so I had stopped being a child to some extent... I suppose I was neither one nor the other, in a way.

Then again, maybe that was true of any high school student.

“Actually...I guess I might as well say it now.”

“What?”

“I was confessed to yesterday, too.”

When Touko told me that to my face, the edges of my vision turned white. At that moment, it was like Touko had just confessed to me, too. I could no longer move, as though my feet had been rooted firmly to the ground.

“Con...fessed?”

“Yeah.”

“By whom?” My voice almost cracked. My eyes were looking at Touko, but they saw nothing.

“Another person from our year. A boy I don’t think I’ve ever even talked to.”

“Oh...a...” A *boy*, I almost said. “A confession, I see.”

If I had blurted that out and she asked, *What do you mean*, “a boy?” I wouldn’t have been able to talk my way out of it, but I somehow caught myself in time. By that time, I started to feel calmer. My legs also started to regain their functionality.

“So when you had something to do... Right, I suppose that is something to do.”

Still, I was a bit upset. As I ruminated over the meaningless words that came out of my mouth, I thought about what I needed to

prioritize. First, I had to know whether the confession was a success.

“Did you accept?” I worried that I seemed more worried than curious, but I had to ask.

Touko continued to face forward as she answered, “I turned him down. I hope he’s not too hurt by it.”

“I see.”

That’s good, I almost said.

“I really hope so, too,” I ended up mumbling, as though it had anything to do with me. My ears started to feel hot, and I turned my eyes away.

For a while, I walked while still avoiding her eyes. Touko didn’t try to say anything, either. I wondered if it was best to let the conversation die without saying any more on the matter. It would probably be awkward to keep grilling her about it...but I was sure that if I dropped the subject, it would keep weighing on my mind when I got back home to my room that day, and I wouldn’t be able to concentrate on anything.

“How did it feel—getting confessed to?” Though I hesitated, unsure whether that was something I should ask, my mouth practically moved on its own.

“Like he must not have very good taste.” The edge of Touko’s mouth lifted crookedly with her self-derision.

“Now, that’s not even remotely true.”

“Oh, that’s a vehement objection.” Touko’s eyes widened as though she were slightly surprised. I was taken aback at myself too, since I had objected on reflex. Still, I couldn’t bear the thought of Touko being that ignorant of her own value.

“Touko, you’re beautiful,” I told her frankly, though I honestly didn’t know if the circumstances gave me a reasonable excuse to say it. It was as though the intensity of the topic had put me on edge, too.

Touko combed her fingers through her hair and then held out her hand to me as though she were offering something. “You are, too, Sayaka.”

“Huh?”

Considering the mood of the conversation, I did feel like there was a chance she might reply like that, but I hadn’t actually expected her to be so straightforward about it. I felt as though my body might freeze up again.

“Is that so shocking?”

“It’s just...not many people have ever said that to me.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

I think. Though I was used to people telling me that I was exceptional and things like that.

“Well...they *really* must not have good taste, then.”

She repeated her words from earlier. There was nothing more I wanted than for Touko to like me, and I didn’t want to think that her compliments were lies. Even Yuzuki-senpai from junior high had probably been drawn to me by my looks at first.

I wanted to preserve some self-confidence, though I felt like I would lose it the longer I stood next to Touko.

“Beautiful, huh?”

“Quite.” The confirmation eased my embarrassment slightly. “But...I think I’m a step or two behind in terms of beauty,” Touko remarked lightly, still trying to deny it. But I was curious about what exactly she meant.

“Who are you comparing yourself to?” Surely, she didn’t mean me. As though Touko had only just realized what she’d said, she shifted her gaze away.

“Oh, no one...” Touko’s reply was short and firm. It was like a hard rock bouncing off the ground. Her voice was cold, as though she would reject anyone trying to touch on the subject. “It’s nothing.”

She started walking faster, leaving her words behind her. Her bleak attempt to cover things up hung in the air and oxidized in a moment’s breath.

I continued to stay a step behind Touko as I let all of that brush past my cheek.

...It definitely couldn’t have been nothing. Someone who was a step or two more beautiful than Touko...I couldn’t even imagine it, but I felt like I wanted to meet them at least once.

Putting that aside...

There were so many things I couldn’t see, that Nanami Touko wouldn’t let me see—her weaknesses, her ugliness, her cowardice, her inferiority complex, her jealousy, her trauma, her real self, her public face, her hatred, her timidity, self-denial, her biases, her disposition, her hostility, her spitefulness, and all the many other dark things hidden inside her.

Certainly, if I caught a glimpse of all those things, there was a

chance that my straightforward feelings for her would be torn to shreds. I didn't know whether that was really something I wanted to find out about or get involved in.

But still...

For the time being, I would keep on walking, following behind her.

"I'm the new student council president." Kuze-senpai smiled in satisfaction as he greeted us. "I just want to say again that I'm looking forward to working with you."

"Sure."

The president's words carried a different weight than he intended, since we all knew he wouldn't be working *with* us so much as leaving the majority of the work *to* us. The previous student council had for the most part finished their work, and the new student council would be taking up the baton starting today. Touko and I had officially joined their number as officers.

"Touko should have just gone straight to becoming student council president."

"Oh, you comedian." Kuze-senpai flapped his hand at me as if to wave off my joke, although I wasn't really joking.

It was May, and our vacation was over. The student council election held early in the new term resulted in the election of Kuze-senpai as president. Obviously, if someone who had barely shown his face in the student council was going out of his way to become president, his motive must be to make his school records look good. In fact, he didn't even try to hide it.

Still, I had suspected that Kuze-senpai would win, since he seemed to be a popular candidate. That was mainly thanks to Nanami Touko, who had trailed behind him helping with election work; most students noticed her more than the actual candidate. Touko said quite a few eyes had also been on me, but if that was the case, I certainly didn't notice.

It seemed that no one cared about Kuze-senpai's motives, but that was hardly unusual. To put it bluntly, no matter who the student president was, there wouldn't be any major changes in the school. A half-baked president wouldn't worsen students' individual troubles, just as a capable president wouldn't make their lives any easier. The student council didn't have enough power to meddle in an individual student's daily affairs. And since it didn't matter who the president was, it was difficult to care much about it.

Considering all of that, the most important factor that determined who someone would vote for was the impression they got of the candidate. It was all about whether they were handsome or pretty, whether they had a lot of presence, or even whether their name was particularly interesting.

And when it came to the people who were working for the candidates, there had been one person beautiful enough to catch everyone's attention. That impression was strong enough to deal the final blow in the vote. In my opinion, at least, that was the reason Kuze-senpai was elected president.

"So we only got two new members this year, huh?"

"These two are more than enough. They're such hard workers." One of the upperclassmen looked at Touko and I in turn.

"I'll be able to bring in someone new next year, though! Well, if he comes to this school, anyway."

"One of *your* underclassman, President Kuze?"

Touko and I looked at each other. I could just picture a doppelganger of the president's carefree face appearing next to him.

"We'd better not get our hopes up then," I observed.

Touko smiled vaguely. She never allowed her friendly demeanor to break down. *I see*, I thought. *She really would make a great president.*

"Sayaka-chan, Touko, I think you'd have an easier time next year if you also invited some underclassman... If you have any, that is," one of the upperclassmen advised us. I wondered if she didn't have any prospective underclassmen recruits herself. Maybe most people just weren't interested unless they wanted to make their school records look good like Kuze-senpai.

That was when I realized why Touko had been so pleased about me joining.

"I never really talked to my underclassmen much... What about you, Sayaka?"

"I went to Tomosumi for junior high, so none of my underclassman will come here, I'm sure."

My friends from elementary school had made even less of an impression on me... I might not even recognize them if I saw them. There was *one* person I couldn't forget, but if anything, I doubt she would want to talk to me.

"Tomosumi? The one that's both a junior high and a high school?"

“Yes.”

If she knew about it, she probably knew what kind of school it was, too. It was unusual for someone to move to a different high school when they went to a combined junior high and high school. I could tell based on her demeanor that Touko was questioning why I chose to come here.

“Commuting by train was more trouble than it was worth.” I recycled the lie I had told my parents. Then I made a mental note that I had done so to make sure I never contradicted that lie.

“Oh, I see...”

Behind her short response, I wondered how much Touko had guessed. Even if she had noticed my lie, though, she didn’t pry any further into my secrets. The same way I never pried into hers.

It was like we were always peeking out at each other from safe inside our respective burrows, and I felt doubt that almost bordered on panic over whether I wanted things to stay that way. What did I want to be with Touko? What did I seek between us? If I knew my answer, I couldn’t stay at a standstill forever.

The president and second years were talking with each other. There was a silent expectation in the air that someone should make tea for everyone. In a situation like this, the underclassmen like Touko and I would normally be the ones do it. It wasn’t as though it was an assigned duty, though, so one of us tended to take on the task through impulse or silent agreement.

“How about we decide who makes the tea with rock-paper-scissors?”

“Huh?”

I wouldn’t have really minded doing it myself, but I felt a small compulsion to try doing something like this with Touko. I wanted to act like friends, that was all.

But Touko’s reaction was more dramatic than I had anticipated. She seemed surprised at herself too, and quickly explained as though she were trying to save face, “It’s just that I’m bad at rock-paper-scissors.”

“You are?” I wondered if there was even such a thing as being bad or good at it.

“Mm-hmm... Maybe I’m just too easy to read.”

She loosely waved her fist, smiling awkwardly. For some reason, something about it felt artificial to me.

“Well, now I *really* want to play it with you.” I went along with it. If she wanted to hide something, then I would let her.

“You’re so mean.” Touko’s mouth softened. She seemed somewhat pleased as she slowly held her fist out in front of her. I couldn’t see what move she would choose based on observing her hands and shoulders. It wasn’t as though paper or scissors were written all over her face, either. She wasn’t easy to read at all.

Nanami Touko was still a mystery to me.

I readied my hand by thrusting it out. Just before we started, Touko absentmindedly looked at her own hand.

“Rock.”

Touko’s arm went up and down weakly.

“Paper.”

Up and down, up and down.

“Scissors.”

I threw paper, and Touko scissors.

Victory...for Touko, that is. I looked carefully at our hands and made sure of it: I really had lost.

“You’re not bad at this at all.”

I wonder if she was being modest when she said she was bad. At that moment, I was sure I looked ridiculous. Touko’s eyes were fixed on my open fingers.

“Yeah...or maybe you’re just even worse than I am, Sayaka?”

“Now that’s a mean thing to say so casually...”

Though she had won, Touko’s fingers were bent half-heartedly, still in the loose shape of scissors. She pulled back her hand and stood up.

“Are you okay with black tea?”

“Huh? But I’m the one who lost.”

“Now that I think about it, you made tea last time. I couldn’t make you do it again.” Touko laughed lightly and headed towards the kettle.

What was the point, then ...? Left behind, my paper drifted in midair with no place to go. I hesitated over whether to go help her but decided to observe her instead.

Touko didn’t falter as she prepared the tea with her back to me. She worked briskly, but it was like she was detached from her

consciousness, moving almost mechanically. I wondered what inner conflict she was dealing with at the moment. She was her usual self on the surface, but there was something subtly different about her.

It seemed unusual for someone to have an emotional attachment to rock-paper-scissors, but Touko clearly had no intention of showing anyone what was bothering her. I'm sure she had her reasons...but I wanted her to share those reasons with me.

I wondered what I needed for that to happen. Trust? Friendship? Or was it love?

After a while, Touko finished preparing everyone's tea and came back. After putting down the cups in front of the second years, the president included, she headed over to me, delivering me a hot mug of tea with her usual smile.

"Thank you. I'll do it next time."

"Ahaha...I guess there was no point to playing rock-paper-scissors." Touko shook her head lightly. She sat back down in a seat and put her hand on her forehead, parting her bangs, and then let out a large sigh. In that moment, I felt like her carefully maintained attitude relaxed very slightly.

It was a small vulnerability that I'm sure most people would have missed if they weren't always paying attention to Touko like I was. When I saw that, I knew that Touko really had been trying to hide something. I knew it.

I kept my attention on Touko until we quietly finished our assigned work for the day.

"Sayaka, can I talk to you about something?"

After we finished clearing away the materials we had been passed along, Touko spoke to me. She was smiling, back to her usual self. *What was that about earlier, then?* In any case, it was easier to talk with her when she was this way.

"Okay." I could never turn down an invitation from Touko.

We left the student council room together. Touko led the way to the bench behind the student council building. It was a useful location, since people rarely came there. Touko and I could be alone together just by ducking behind this wall.

I brushed off the bench, gathered up my skirt, and sat down. I had seen a bee flying near the student council room earlier, so I was extra cautious of my surroundings. I had never been stung by one before, so I was all the more afraid of the potential pain. Besides, the buzzing sound of their rapidly beating wings always put me on edge.

“This is the opposite of before, isn’t it?”

Touko smiled as she referred to both the order in which we sat on the bench and who invited who. *Before*, I mused to myself as I remembered the cloudy sky from that day. We certainly were sitting in opposite positions compared to then.

The only constant was the distance between us.

“Maybe we should go into town and chat over tea once in a while.”

I wondered if Touko had blurted that out because the sun still felt warm on our skin even as we sat in the shade. The early summer had started to pour over us, and not a single cool breeze visited us under the cover of the trees.

“Let’s do that next time, then.” I was happy to spend more time with Touko after school, but I would prefer to keep hanging out separate from this kind of conversation. “So, what did you want to talk about?”

I could think of three prospects for what Touko might want to talk about. I wondered which it would be. If it were completely outside of my expectations, I would have trouble responding.

Touko looked me over and then turned to the front, averting her eyes from me.

“So, I’ve been wanting to ask you this for a while. Sayaka...have you ever eaten fast food?”

“.....”

The past I had put behind me replayed in my mind.

Before I could get angry, I burst out laughing instead. “You’re not the first person to ask me that.”

“Oh.”

“Do I look like that much of a rich girl?”

“More or less.”

What about you, Touko? I almost said, but when I looked at her, I felt that couldn’t be the case. Touko looked incredibly elegant, but it didn’t feel like she came from high status. She had an easygoing friendliness about her and an undeniably good attitude towards people... I wondered if that was something I was missing.

“I see... It must be the way my family brought me up and all the lessons I took.” This wasn’t an answer to Touko’s question, but that was the environment I had been raised in. It was the cradle that I’d been given to guide me from childhood to adulthood. I couldn’t deny

the fact that it made me into the person I am now.

“Lessons... So that’s how you did the thing for the student council election?”

“Yes.” Using the results of my calligraphy practice, I had written president Kuze’s full name out in large script. “If you want to run for the elections next year, I’ll be happy to do it again.”

Nanami Touko. I was sure that I would practice her name countless times at home before writing the final version.

“You’re so dependable.”

When Touko complimented me, I felt there had been a point to learning calligraphy after all. I was sure that my other lessons would also gain meaning in the same way, sooner or later. I was looking forward to that very much.

Touko, who had been closing her eyes, opened them and shaped rock, then paper, then scissors, one at a time with her hands.

“When you play rock-paper-scissors, people tend to use the same move most of the time, right?”

“Right...” I reflected back on our game as I agreed. I hadn’t thought very hard before I put out paper, almost as though I was simply reaching for Touko.

“I think there probably aren’t many people who change what they put out for rock-paper-scissors based on the other person. You just start with the move you like most. For me, that’s scissors. I put out scissors right away. I wonder why?” Touko raised her index finger and middle finger in the shape of scissors, gazing through the gap between them as if she was looking for something.

I didn’t really have an answer for her question. An expert of some kind might have been able to explain it, but it was likely that Touko wasn’t seeking a scientific explanation. She unfurled the rest of her fingers.

“I guess I should have put out paper instead,” she murmured to herself. There was a hint of self-deprecation hidden in her smile.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing. Don’t worry about it.” Touko withdrew her hand.

“That’s easier said than done...”

If she was going to keep hinting at things while refusing to actually tell me, I would have preferred she bury it deeper, in a place where no one would ever see it. My grades would be at risk again if Touko took up any more of my thoughts. Still, I didn’t want to

distance myself from her.

“Sorry,” Touko apologized to me. I couldn’t bring myself to give an understanding response like *it’s fine* , so I just gave a vague “Hmm.” The silence that followed reminded me of the buzz of an approaching insect’s wings.

“Does the garden at your house look like this, Sayaka?” Touko asked at last, looking at the scene in front of us.

“No, it’s not nearly this disorderly.”

“Disorderly, you say...”

“And sometimes the cats come out.”

“Cats are great.” Touko took the bait. So she liked cats, too. I felt relieved that we had that in common.

“I’d like to go over to your house to pet your cats sometime, Sayaka.”

“You’re welcome to anytime.” It seemed like I would have to be the one to bring it up. “...So, what did you really want to discuss? Is it a difficult topic?”

We weren’t really getting to the point, so I tried to infer based on the mood. Nanami Touko was always confident in her actions, never timid. Her friendly nature gave me that impression, at least, but maybe she could be confused or hesitant at times just like any normal person. ...What did I mean by *normal person* , anyway? Did I think Touko was so special that she was beyond human?

Ah, but I suppose I really did feel that way about her, ever since she stole my heart at first sight at the entrance ceremony. I thought of her as someone who was always walking ahead of me.

“Hm... Not necessarily, but you might think it’s a little weird.”

“A little weird...?”

I wondered what exactly Touko considered weird. Perhaps this was a good opportunity to find out. And if she was going to be weird, then I needed to balance it out by being straightforward.

“In that case, I’ll listen to you seriously. Being serious is my specialty, after all.” I was confident in my ability to keep a consistent stance once I’d made up my mind.

Touko accepted my attitude and broke into a smile. “I like how straightforward you are, Sayaka.”

“Thanks.” Even this casual statement that she *liked* something about me made my heart flutter like paper blown in the wind.

“I don’t think this topic is *that* intense, though.” Touko gave me a wry smile—one that reminded me of trees resisting a gale. She put her fists on top of her knees and looked at me. “You asked me before whether there was something I wanted to do by joining the student council, right?”

So that’s it. The second prospect that I had come up with was correct, then.

Touko said, “What I want to do in the student council is put on a play.”

“...A play?” At first, I wasn’t sure whether I had heard her correctly. The two ideas didn’t seem connected at all until Touko explained.

“Right. A theatrical drama organized by the student council officers. I want to put it on at the cultural festival.”

That was an entirely unexpected request. Just as she had prefaced earlier, it was a weird topic indeed. If someone wanted to put on a play, they would normally join the drama club. Didn’t our school have one?

“Why a play with the student council?” There must be some special reason why it had to be through the student council, then.

“Because it apparently used to be a tradition.”

“Huh...”

I wondered how long ago that must have been and how Touko knew about it so soon after starting school here. I already had my doubts after this brief exchange, but first, I felt I should hear Touko out until the end.

“And you want to revive that tradition?”

“I wouldn’t call it something as big as a revival, but...it’s just, don’t you feel like doing something grandiose now that we’ve joined the student council? Otherwise, I feel like we’re going to spend two years doing nothing but organizing documents.”

Touko glanced at the student council room. Other than the election, we certainly had only been doing clerical work since entering the student council. There would probably be more behind-the-scenes work to do in the future, but evidently, Touko wasn’t satisfied with that.

“So this is sort of like how sports clubs have tournaments?”

“I suppose it’s similar to that. It’s always easier to find something to do when you have a goal.” Touko was committed and energetic; she

certainly didn't seem to be harboring some inner obsession.

Still, I had to wonder. It seemed plausible, but I also felt as though she was going about something in a roundabout way. Was it shallow of me to think that she should have joined a sports club from the start if all she wanted was to achieve a goal?

"I'd like you to help me with that, Sayaka. So...what do you say?" Her humble smile and voice sought my answer.

A play, huh? I felt like refusing at first. Theater wasn't normally my thing, and I doubted I could ever aspire to the stage at my present level of connection to it. Besides, tradition or not, I still couldn't see a link between the student council and putting on plays.

I wondered what this meant to Touko. Though she spoke as though it were trivial, I suspected that there was actually some sort of immense meaning behind everything. Did Touko feel that revealing her secrets would be a sign of weakness? Or was it that she couldn't tell me what it was because we weren't close enough?

Either way, I felt vexed. But at the same time, I was admittedly happy that I was probably the first person Touko had spoken to about her goal at the student council. That genuine joy rendered me into a simple creature.

I couldn't tell her that I refused to help unless she explained everything to me. If anything, knowing the truth might leave me all the more paralyzed.

I was starting to become cowardly.

In that case, I would turn a blind eye to the many uncertainties and accept the hand that was reaching for me. Touko needed my help. I knew that much for sure.

"If that's what you want to do, Touko, then I'll help."

As a fellow member of the student council, as a friend, and... I kept my other reason secret as I pledged to help her.

Right. I was keeping secrets from her, too.

"Thank you."

"But I've never put on a play before, so I might make a terrible actress."

"I don't have experience either. So let's practice together." Touko cracked a smile, one full of almost childish relief.

The student council was going to be busy enough working on the cultural festival in addition to its regular tasks. Adding rehearsals for a play on top of all that seemed like a dizzying amount of work. I

couldn't see Kuze-senpai, who already didn't even show up at the student council most days, approving of something that would be such a hassle. And putting on a play with our five current members... What could we possibly produce? It was hard to imagine doing it with so few people, especially when we would likely need backstage help as well.

Many hardships awaited on the journey towards Touko's dream.

"Out of curiosity, does our school have a drama club?"

"It does not."

So we couldn't even ask for help. "In that case, we'll likely have a hard time getting props together for the performance."

The teachers probably wouldn't be much help with the play, either. Maybe these were some of the reasons the tradition died out, I thought. Touko smiled patiently as she waited for me. Clearly, she wasn't going to give up so easily.

I decided I wanted to give her the response she was expecting. "All right. Let's give it our best shot."

Though my heart wasn't terribly interested in theater, it was happy to show its devotion to Touko however it could.

She closed her eyes gently, as though content with my reply. "You're so pleasant to be around, Sayaka."

I think she was trying to praise me. My own eyes shut and my body froze in place as I thought over her words, imagining the sound of insect wings buzzing in the air.

Pleasant...right.

I couldn't help wondering if what she really meant was "convenient," but perhaps that miserable distortion was just the result of my past experiences.

In the latter half of May, after midterms had finished, it was nearly time for us to swap out our seasonal uniforms. We had no events in June, so our work in the student council had reached a lull.

One day after school, when I tried to head over to the student council with Touko as usual, she replied: "Oh, you can go on ahead, Sayaka. I have to take care of something first."

"Hmm."

"What's with that reaction?"

"Is someone confessing to you again or something?"

Her shoulders twitched noticeably.

“Goodness. I was mostly joking.” She had just been confessed to about two weeks ago, and now she was already getting another one. I suppose it was like how bamboo shoots appear right after a rain. “At this rate, the whole school’s going to have confessed to you.”

I spoke as though I were joking, but I was slightly jealous. Touko turned her head down and acted as though she were thinking.

“It’ll get awkward if rumors go around that I always reject them the same way...”

“That’s quite a novel problem to have.”

“But it would be weird if I had different reasons for each one, too.”

So I’ll reject this one with the same reason as always, her words seemed to imply. I felt relieved, though I didn’t say so out loud.

Touko always rejected confessions automatically... I had to wonder what her type was. Maybe her heart really wouldn’t be swayed in the slightest even if she received a confession from every single student in the school.

Including me.

“So if everyone at school were going to confess to me, would that include you, Sayaka?”

Her joke was so close to what I had been thinking that I nearly lost my cool.

“Maybe, but maybe not. Since I already know you’d reject me.” Joking or otherwise, just saying it out loud made my heart twist in pain.

“You don’t know that. Your confession might just be too charming to turn down.”

Touko’s jest made dreams blossom in my mind. I sorely wanted to go along with it, to put my feelings into words and deliver them to her. But my actual response was to only look up at the sky like a flightless bird.

“All right, then. If you can’t find anyone else...that might not be a terrible idea.”

I prayed that the lie, which was so precarious that it felt like it could topple over even now, told her nothing. Before Touko could reply, an interruption, or perhaps a lifeboat, came to my aid.

“Then maybe I’ll put my hat in the ring, too.”

This time it was my turn to twitch. Manaka stuck her face out from next to me. Behind her, Midori had her hands on her hips, her eyes narrowed in an exasperated expression.

“You already know how she’ll reply, so please just stop.”

“Aw, but you don’t actually know that.” Manaka sought agreement from Touko, who promptly rejected her with a smile.

“Sorry.”

“Oh, that was over quick.”

“Told you so.” For some reason, Midori seemed smug.

Instead of withdrawing, Manaka turned to me. “Then maybe I’ll try Sayaka.”

What’s that supposed to mean?

“What do you say?” Manaka innocently asked me out. I wondered what would happen if she chose the wrong person and they took her seriously. Then again, it might not have occurred to Manaka that there could be people like that.

“Sorry.”

“Aww.” Manaka slumped with unconvincing disappointment. “This is the first time I’ve been turned down twice in a day.”

“It’s no wonder, with the way you act.”

“Hm.” Manaka finally pulled back her head and then turned to Midori. “What about you, Midori?”

“Is that any way to ask?” Midori seemed at a loss for words. Finally, she pulled Manaka out of the classroom. “Come on, let’s just go.”

“But I’m not in the English conversation club with you.”

Before Manaka could get an answer about where they were going, the pair had disappeared. Once they made their noisy yet casual exit, Touko remarked, “They certainly seem close.”

“They really do.” Maybe they were just incredibly compatible.

“Oh, right, I was supposed to meet that person...” Touko checked the classroom clock and picked up her bag in a hurry. “Now that I think about it, they just asked me to meet them—it might not be a confession after all,” she added optimistically.

“Is there anything else you think it could be?”

“Not really.” Touko walked quickly towards the classroom door and then looked back at me with a promise, as though she were entrusting me with a key. “I’ll go to the student council room right

after it's done, so wait for me."

"I'll be waiting."

I waved quietly and watched her leave.

Just waiting for her filled me with happiness. I had truly entrusted my whole heart to her. We were inextricably connected, at least in my mind. My heart would dance from the faintest of Touko's reactions and storm at the most trivial of her words.

My footsteps were light as I headed to the student council room to wait for Touko.

I could hear voices behind the trees on my way over, like small breaths that seemed to lightly graze the surface of my ear. It was strange that I could hear them from such a far distance. This had happened in the past, too. That time, I hadn't recognized the voices, so I wasn't able to react.

But today was different. The voices grew more distinct as I approached the corner of the school building, and I peered around against my better judgment. When I saw Touko turned towards my direction and the back of a boy in front of me, I immediately hid.

This certainly was the scene of a confession. *I guess this is the designated spot for it now*, I thought absently.

"You have nothing to apologize for."

Touko looked sheepish as the boy lowered his head in apology. It seemed that she had already turned down his confession. The boy started babbling as though to save face, saying things like that he really wasn't a good match for Touko or that he had overreached. Touko stopped him before he could go on further.

"That's not the issue. It's not you, or that we're a bad match, it's just..." Touko spoke with a clear smile that wasn't fitting for the moment of rejection. "I don't intend to fall in love with anyone."

That reply from Touko seemed to reach right past the boy to strike me directly.

Once the boy gave a final bow of his head and left, Touko breathed out a deep sigh. Her shoulders slumped as though the nervousness were leaving her. As she looked down, her lips mumbled soundlessly.

It almost looked like she was murmuring, *"I wonder why..."*

Eventually, Touko straightened herself up and pulled the strap of her bag over her shoulder as she left. Watching her go, I exhaled a sigh and slumped down, as if mimicking her actions. I slowly closed

my eyes and recalled Touko's voice.

"Not with *anyone*?" I leaned against the wall of the school building as I lamented. The sentiment was at once accompanied by relief and a certain contradictory sadness.

I wondered what kind of relationship I sought with Nanami Touko. Was it a bond far stronger than I could possibly hope to achieve?

I tried to say it out loud, but although no one was around to hear, my face felt hot with shame. Just imagining that I might end up telling Touko about those feelings someday made me feel dizzy.

Touko...

"Oh."

It suddenly dawned on me. I needed to get to the student council room before Touko. I had told her I would be waiting.

I started running from the building. I remembered Touko running ahead of me during marathon training in PE. Still, surely my running would be faster than her walking. I wondered just how long it had been since I had last run as fast as I could over the ground. My breath bobbed along with the strap of my bag on my shoulder as I quickly ran to get to the student council room ahead of her.

Just as I saw the student council room coming into sight, I thought I heard footsteps behind me, so I turned—and my jaw dropped. Touko was running towards me.

She was gaining more and more on me, shortening the distance between us. At first, I tried to speed up and move faster, but then I came to my senses. If she had seen me, didn't that mean there was no need to run anymore?

Touko overtook me as soon as I slowed down. Instead of going straight to the student council room, though, she traced a wide arc and came back around. She wasn't even short of breath as she stopped in front of me.

"Wh-what is it?" I panted.

"I saw you running, so I thought something might have happened." Touko was grinning with satisfaction at having caught up to me. "Nothing's wrong?"

"No."

"So you were just running for no reason?" Unable to admit otherwise, I stayed silent. Touko nodded thoughtfully. "I guess that does happen sometimes."

Does it, though? I wasn't sure why Touko accepted my lack of explanation so easily. The lie of omission left an unpleasant taste in my mouth.

"Did you have something you needed to do too, Sayaka?"

She must be referring to why I hadn't reached the student council room yet. I thought of easy, believable replies, like *yeah* or *just a little*. But I wasn't accustomed to lying without hesitation.

I was all too aware that I was a bad liar, so I decided to be honest. "I'm sorry. The truth is, I was watching while you were being confessed to, Touko."

Before, when Touko asked me what I would do in a situation like this, I had replied that I wouldn't say anything. Now I was doing just the opposite. I suppose sometimes you don't know how you'll react to a situation until it actually happens. You wind up thinking with your heart, and with your gut.

Once I confessed to my crime, Touko turned around and put her finger to her face. "I see. It was the same place where Serizawa and Ogaki-kun were, so...were you hiding in the shadows?"

She'd even correctly guessed my hiding place. When I nodded, Touko turned forward again, her lips pursed a bit sulkily.

"Not many people go through there, but I guess the student council officers would overhear things. I wonder if everyone would stop trying to confess in that spot if they knew."

"Well, yes, I imagine so..."

"Still, it's not as if I was going to hide it from you anyway, Sayaka... Ah, but I suppose he would probably prefer it to be a secret, hmm? So let's keep this between us."

Touko put her index finger up to her lips. I mimicked the gesture back to her, but I didn't really understand what exactly we were trying to keep a secret.

"I heard voices, so I just went over without thinking."

"So you couldn't help it, huh? I did the same thing last time, so it's not like I can judge."

Touko grinned like a mischievous kid. I only rarely caught glimpses of such childlike moments from her, and during those times, I always turned my gaze away, overcome by my feelings for her. She was so dazzling, I couldn't look at her directly.

"I need to be more careful about that spot next time someone confesses to me."

“Right...” I felt like I was close to being overwhelmed by Nanami Touko. Who else could rightfully worry about such a thing? *Next time...* As if realizing what she had said, Touko paused and questioned her own prediction.

“I wonder if there *will* be a next time?”

“Of course there will.”

I don’t think I had ever been so sure about something that had to do with someone else.

You’re Nanami Touko, after all.

“If we want to do it this year, I think we’ll need to propose it soon or we won’t make it in time.” Touko immediately cut through the small talk to broach the main topic.

“You mean the student council play?”

“Right.” Touko nodded and then dug into her lunch. It was as though her ambition was affecting her appetite. “We only have four months, with summer break in between before the cultural festival.”

“That’s true...” Though I also thought worrying about preparations for a cultural festival performance four months ahead of time was overdoing it. Still, we weren’t exactly a drama club, so we certainly would need plenty of practice.

“A play?” Midori, who had been eating with us, interjected. She had a separate chair from Manaka this time.

“Touko is thinking of putting on a play with the student council.”

“Huh. Sounds like fun.”

Since Manaka wasn’t directly involved, the idea seemed to casually amuse her. On the other hand, Midori seemed utterly confused.

“Why would the student council put on a play?”

“Seems there are a few reasons.”

That was the first question that came to my mind too, but I still hadn’t researched the particulars of the tradition, so I couldn’t explain it in detail.

“From what I understand, it first started when the culture club said that they wanted to do a collaboration for the festival,” Touko said, taking over for me. “But the school doesn’t have a drama club, so there were no actors... So apparently the student council were the actors, and it became a tradition from there.”

“Wow.”

This was my first time hearing how the play had come to be. I wondered whether Touko had looked that up or heard it from someone else. At any rate, if we needed to ask for help from the other clubs, then Touko was right that we might not have enough time.

“Wow, a play, huh? Seems like fun.”

“Want to join the student council?” Touko solicited her with a smile.

“I guess you and Sayaka are in it and all. Hmm, I dunno...” Manaka, who was part of the so-called going-home club, put down her half-eaten sandwich to stew on the thought.

“Just so you know, you’d have to do other chores and stuff every day when the play’s not going on,” Midori warned.

“Oh. That’s no fun.” Just like that, Manaka gave up.

“I’d go to see it if it’s a period drama.” This was an unexpected statement from Midori, who was in the English conversation club. When she mentioned period dramas, I imagined Touko and I up on the gym stage wearing wigs while crossing swords. Naturally, I would be the one who got cut down.

“Are you okay with a period drama?”

“Erm, I haven’t really thought about that part of it very much...”

“Right,” I agreed. Preparing the costumes seemed like it would be a pain, anyway.

“I want to see the police force from the Edo period, the Shinsengumi.”

“We definitely wouldn’t have enough people for that...” Regardless of the setting, we had five actors at most.

Manaka’s eyes grew distant as she started spacing out, then lobbed a new question at us. “Would that one Momotaro folktale be considered a period drama?”

“No, I doubt it.”

We had that conversation during our lunch break and then another after school.

“The first issue is whether the president will come to the student council room at all today.”

“If it doesn’t seem like he will, let’s go directly to the kendo club and talk to him,” Touko replied determinedly. There was no hesitation in her speedy footsteps. Touko never strayed from her path and never

slowed down. Yet, for some reason, her attitude didn't necessarily feel positive to me.

"So, Touko."

"What is it?"

As we changed our shoes, I hesitated a moment and then told her what I was thinking. "You're being surprisingly pushy."

"You think so?" Touko tilted her head quizzically at me, as though she wasn't aware of it herself.

Sure enough, president Kuze wasn't in the student council room.

"Will the president be in today?"

"Doubt it," our black-haired upperclassman snorted. He seemed to have long since given up on the president ever showing up to meetings.

"I see... Then if you'll excuse me for a bit." Putting down her bag, Touko bowed and left the student council room shortly after entering.

"Oh, but what about your work?"

"Sorry, please let me do it once I get back."

I put my bag down as well and followed her. The upperclassman we had left behind watched us with her head propped in her hand as she lamented, "Why did you even come?"

Since I had been invited to join the student council on my very first day, I had never gone to observe the sports clubs. This was the first time I had walked over to the kendo area. As we approached the building behind the gym, I heard the blunt sound of something being hit, followed by the dull sound of someone stomping hard against the floor.

That didn't seem to intimidate Touko in the slightest as she headed towards the entrance. Once she had her mind set on something, she didn't allow anything else to faze her... I wasn't sure if that was because she had a high aptitude for concentration or simply didn't have the time to spare for outside distractions. I suspected the latter. Touko was incredibly tense at times, like she was darting forward in a straight line and wouldn't let anyone catch up to her.

"Whuh?" When Touko peeked into the dojo, Kuze-senpai immediately exclaimed in surprise at our presence. He withdrew from the practice circle and took off his mask.

"Yeah, they're officers in the student council," he introduced us to the other members as he approached the entrance of the dojo. "You

know, I sometimes forget that I'm the student council president," he grumbled, wiping the sweat off his forehead. "What is it? Are you interested in the kendo club after all this time?"

"No, you just never come, so we decided to head over to you." If only he would apply that free-flowing sweat to his work at the student council.

"Sorry, sorry. But look, the summer tournament is coming up." Kuze-senpai hardly showed any guilt as he unwrapped the *tenugui* from his head and then roughly wiped his neck. His hair was a rumpled mess from being tucked under the towel-like wrapping. "So, what did you come all the way here for?"

Touko and I looked at each other and nodded. Then, Touko explained the proposal we had talked about.

"A play? What's up with that?" Kuze-senpai questioned, as though he doubted his ears. It seemed that this was his first time hearing about the student council play.

When Touko continued to explain it, Kuze-senpai's face became sterner. "Us, do a play? Not gonna happen."

Naturally, Touko wasn't going to give up so easily. "Of course, it wouldn't just be on our own. I'm planning on making this happen by getting help from the other clubs."

"Hmm... Yeah, no way. We can't pull that off."

The look on President Kuze's face was unfavorable. I could immediately see that he wasn't going to go along with this sudden proposal. To be honest, I would have been against it myself had it not been Touko who had proposed it. "There are so many problems and things to do. We couldn't manage it."

"Problems?" Touko questioned him in a slightly firm voice.

I was dubious that he was going to say anything other than that he didn't want to participate in a play, but Kuze-senpai was unexpectedly talkative. "Well, first, getting together the props will be hard. We'd just use the gym or whatever, so that's fine. But the real question is, what kind of play are you talking about exactly? I mean, do you even have a script?"

"Ah."

He was pointing out reasonable things an upperclassman normally would, which came as a surprise to me.

"Even finding someone who can write a script will be difficult, and we don't have a drama club, so we don't have anyone to guide us. And since we don't have one, we don't have anyone with acting

experience, either. Don't you think all this is kind of a big ask?"

His words were somewhat harsh, leaving little room for argument. For the first time, I recognized that this person was an upperclassman and the student council president.

"That's my opinion, at least," Kuze-senpai added with a weak smile, as though feeling guilty for rejecting the idea so bluntly. "If you've got more details to share, then I'll hear you out some other time. Although I'll probably still be against it."

He looked over his shoulder, clearly reluctant to keep away from practice for too long. "See ya."

With that, he waved his hand at us and quickly went back to what he was doing. Maybe he was also afraid things would go downhill if Touko kept pushing to persuade him. But Touko's attention had already shifted to something other than pursuing further conversation with Kuze-senpai.

"A script, huh..."

I could tell the wheels in her mind were spinning about the deficiency he had pointed out. She showed no signs of moving from the entrance as she mumbled to herself, so I pushed her along and left the kendo area behind us.

"The president sure is strict when he's against something," I remarked as I accompanied Touko, whose feet trudged towards the student council room. "I don't think that the things Kuze-senpai was saying were wrong, though. Putting on a play is a lot of work."

"You're right... I wonder what the previous upperclassmen did about scripts." Touko was crestfallen. Evidently even she didn't have the talent for that kind of thing. "I wonder if we have a literature club."

"We do." I remembered seeing them at the club introduction.

Touko straightened out a bit. "Maybe we can ask them for a script."

"I think that's a good idea. But the question is whether they could finish it by fall if we asked them now."

If they absorbed themselves in that work all summer break, they might be able to do it, but it would be difficult to find someone who would be willing to help us to that extent in the first place... Though, if Touko passionately asked someone, I wouldn't be surprised if their heart was moved enough to do it.

"Maybe I should have proposed it after becoming president."

This seemed quite a confident claim, although at the same time, she spoke almost as though she were talking about someone else.

“Perhaps. Everyone would react differently if it were the president proposing it.”

I didn’t know whether people would be for or against it, but they would hear her out, at the very least. Then she would just have to work the crowd in her favor. Right now, if the president was against it, there was frankly nothing more she could do.

“But there’s no guarantee I’ll become president next year.”

That’s why I wanted to do it starting this year and make it happen as soon as I can. That was probably what Touko was actually thinking. Though it seemed like she had plenty of opportunities in theory, in practice all she really had was this year and next year. It wasn’t as though the student council could do the play at any time other than during the cultural festival.

“You’ll make it happen, Touko.”

“You’re just saying that.” Touko smiled weakly.

She might have thought I was only trying to console her, so I decided to tell her more definitively, “No, I really do mean it. I’m sure that if you just continue forward like you are now, you’ll get to what you want. I believe in you, Touko.”

Nanami Touko. When I saw her in the classroom, it seemed like there was nothing she couldn’t do. Of course, now that I was actually working with her, I knew she could hit walls like this sometimes. But I expected her to scale those walls and to keep moving ahead of me. That was the type of person she was.

“What I want, huh...”

I didn’t know what was behind Touko’s smile as she murmured those words. At some point, I hoped that she would share it with me. I wanted to be someone who Touko would unquestionably present her desires to. But because she couldn’t do that now, all I could do was offer her my own words.

“I know that this is your dream, Touko. Is it something you absolutely need to happen this year?”

I realized we had both stopped walking. The branches of the trees in the background rustled sluggishly.

If she could wait...

“Let’s give it a year. We still have plenty of time to make sure it happens.”

It wasn't as though we could just sit on our laurels, but still, some things could only be solved by the passage of time. Until I came to this school, my thoughts were always negative, trapped in the past. But just one glimpse of Touko, just being by her side...was enough to change me completely.

Instead of answering right away, Touko paused. "Can I really have a year of your time, Sayaka?"

"I don't mind." If it was a year in which I could get close to Touko, there was nothing I wanted more. And perhaps my own wish would come true...not in a year, but on a more distant day.

A smile came over Touko's face, and I answered with a smile as well. Without a doubt, neither of us could perceive the other's true feelings.

"Thank you. We'll make the student council play happen for sure."

"Right."

"In that case...okay, we need to get back to the student council room." Her attitude recovering completely, Touko's feet lightly carried her forward, so fast that I couldn't keep up with her.

For better or worse, Touko pulled me along. I was incredibly comforted to have found someone who would walk ahead of me. I had started high school life with no special goals, but now I knew exactly what to focus on.

Touko sought a friend she could rely on in me. And as long as I provided that, I could stay by her side.

I believed with all my heart that I could do it.

I believed.

After that, Touko didn't try to push the student council play on the president any further. She didn't mention it in the student council room and did her work just like always... Well, not *quite* the same as always, I suppose. Touko was putting more passion into her student council work than ever. She was probably trying to make a name for herself in anticipation of running for president in the next election.

On top of that, she went around to the various non-athletic clubs, talking to them and gaining support for the student council play. She seemed to have accepted that we didn't have enough time to prepare this year and that the current officers weren't interested in doing it, so instead she was trying to line things up so that it would be successful in the following year.

But just because we had time didn't mean everything would work itself out. While we would most likely get new student council members in the coming year, we would have even fewer people than before if there were only one or two, as was the case with Touko and I this year. It was important to secure as many members as we could.

The other unexpected blow came from the literature club: the current members specialized only in reading and didn't write at all. This meant another snag in our search for a script, and this time we didn't have any other ideas.

During our break that day, we leaned against the wall in the hallway, chatting absentmindedly. The sunlight from the hall windows warmed our necks, and the hustle and bustle of crisscrossing voices burst at us from the left and right. As we stood still, even the steady flow of footsteps seemed hectic by comparison.

Touko voiced her hopes. "If we can, I'd like to do an original script."

But if we reproduced an existing play, we wouldn't have to find someone to write a script at all. Though I didn't want to oppose her, I thought it would be best to work under the assumption that we might not be able to find someone to write a script for us. It would be excellent if we did in the end, but I would prefer to have a contingency plan, even if it might be a wasted effort.

"Why don't you try writing a script, Touko?"

"What? No way." Touko declined on the spot.

"It's not like you to say no to something without even trying."

If I started to question what *did* seem like Touko, I might just be caught up thinking about it for the rest of the day.

"Well, actually...the truth is, I tried my hand at writing a bit just to see what would happen, but it was impossible. I can't even think of a beginning. People who can write those things are definitely special."

At first, there was bashfulness mixed into her declaration, but the latter half of what she said held disappointment.

"Special, eh?" Personally, I doubted that anyone was as special as Touko.

"Yeah. So I suppose it was the natural course for writers to disappear from literature clubs. But still, I don't know what to do..."

She covered her face in despair and then glanced at me through her fingers. She was trying to request my help, although I doubted her expectations were high.

“Did you have any lessons about anything like that?”

“I learned how to write prettily, not how to actually put words together.”

When I thought about it, writing was really just stringing one word to the next. The simple sentences I wrote day to day, the things that the teachers wrote on the blackboard, and the works of famous novelists were all fundamentally the same. By changing how those words combined, they invoked beauty, drew up metaphors, and cultivated them into something greater.

In that case, writing really would be difficult for me. I wasn't cut out for forging new paths and making discoveries.

“I wonder if there's anyone here who wants to become a novelist...” Touko looked around the hallway. Did she think they would be easy to identify somehow? Novelists these days likely wouldn't even have writing calluses on their fingers.

“You think there would just be one hanging around here?”

“I was just being optimistic...” Touko half-smiled as she looked away but then immediately turned back to me. “How about we try keeping a lookout at a bookstore and ask someone who buys writerly books?”

Touko's sudden ideas were often so childlike, I couldn't decide whether to be charmed or exasperated. “Are you just going to hang around bookstores every day?”

“Well, I like looking at books, so I wouldn't get bored.”

“You should be doing your student council work.”

“You don't say.” Evidently, Touko really was joking this time.

“Even if someone were trying to become a novelist, I don't think they'd admit it to most people,” I advised her.

“Why not?”

Perhaps Touko, always self-confident, wasn't familiar with this feeling. “When you always have your sights set on something that high, other people might think you're strange... At least, that's the fear, I think.”

And if people laughed at you, even a little, your dreams would wither away. Maybe that was why it felt so blissful to find someone you can safely bare your heart to.

Touko seized me with a sideways glance. “Does that mean I'm weird, too?”

“You just seem passionate to me.” I wasn't just saying it, either—

I really did see her that way.

“Do you have any dreams, Sayaka?”

“Me...?” I paused.

The dream I had now was Touko...to be by Touko’s side. To become something special to her. Immediately, I understood how talking about one’s dream could be embarrassing. And naturally, it would be especially so in front of Touko herself.

“I haven’t really thought about it much.”

“Really?” Touko leaned over a little as she peered at me.

“I feel like I’d neglect the things I need to do right now, so I don’t think too much about the distant future,” I said, trying to come up with a plausible excuse.

“Are you really okay with being so realistic, Sayaka?”

“I’m not sure how to answer that.”

I smiled slightly. Dreams were just as much a part of reality as anything else, so I couldn’t quite grasp the meaning of the word “realistic” here. No matter what we try to do or see, only reality spreads out before us. The question is what you do about it.

Touko was betting everything on the success of the play. But why?

Was it alright for me to know the answer, when she wouldn’t tell me herself?

It happened back when we went to consult the literature club.

The club met in an open classroom near the music room. The furniture was slightly different from what we used in our classrooms; maybe the members had provided it themselves. There were thick curtains drawn to block out the sunlight, making the air seem dusty. Though not much sound reached us from the music room—potentially because of soundproofing—I could hear the lively shouts from the sports clubs running on the school grounds.

There were six club members. Each of them held a book in one hand, so it was quite plain to see they were the literature club. However...

“Sorry, but none of us write.”

I wonder what went through Touko’s mind when she was promptly rejected by the literature club president. At the very least, she was still friendly on the surface.

“What do you normally do?” she asked.

“We talk about our impressions of the books we’ve read, and so on.”

“I see...” Touko didn’t press any further, leaving the club room with a simple “Thank you.”

As I started to follow her, I heard something.

“Was that Nanami-san? I hardly recognized her.”

Sitting in the corner, one of the girls from the literature club muttered to another as though she had just made the realization. I looked over my shoulder. Something about the way she said it, and her expression, stuck with me even after I left the room.

“So the literature club was a bust,” Touko lamented in the hallway. “I guess it makes sense. It is easier and more fun to read than to write, after all.”

“Is that what it is?”

I didn’t find much interest in reading, so it was difficult for me to sympathize with Touko’s observation. At this point, my junior high self would have changed herself to align with Touko. Looking back, there were times when I felt that had been a mistake, but now I wondered what would be the best choice in this situation.

Which did Touko want me to do?

“What should we do? I can’t think of a single other idea.”

“Right...” I mumbled. There was something else on my mind, and soon, my walking slowed to a stop. “Hey, Touko.”

“Hm?”

“I think I want to talk to them a little more. Could you go on ahead without me?”

I knew that there was a certain unnaturalness to my excuse. They had given me no reason to want to ask about anything else.

Even though she seemed to want to ask *why*? Touko purposefully didn’t say it out loud. “Okay, then I’ll head over to the student council.”

“Yes. I’ll come right after I’m done.” Just as usual, we parted ways amicably—even though there was more that each of us wanted to say to the other.

Touko had acted like she wanted to ask me something, but she hadn’t mentioned it out loud. Most likely, she was being careful because she herself had something she didn’t want me to pry into. The

fact that we allowed each other to have secrets made things easier. As long as the distance between us remained constant, we would continue to walk side by side.

Endlessly, without ever changing.

I returned to the literature club's room. "Excuse me."

The literature club girl who had spoken before appeared slightly surprised to see me return so soon. "Oh. Ermm...Saeki-san, is it?"

When she said my name, even though we hadn't been introduced that I recalled, I reservedly answered, "That's right."

"Um, did you need something from me?"

"More or less."

"Well, come in."

Closing the book she was holding, the girl pulled up a chair next to her. "Thanks," I said, sitting down at once. The other club members must have been wondering why I had come—both me and Touko.

"Sorry for interrupting while you're having your club meeting."

"Oh, well, we're just reading right now anyway. Are you interested in the literature club? Of course you're not."

She finished by answering her own question, which put me in a difficult position. She was right, though. What I was interested in wasn't the club, but in Touko.

"It's not a big deal or anything, but...are you a friend of Touko's?"

Her earlier comment had made it seem as if she knew Touko from the past. Naturally, there was a younger version of Nanami Touko I didn't know. A slight amount of jealousy accompanied my curiosity.

I was lucky to have met Touko in high school, but I ended up greedily wishing I had met her even earlier. I wondered what kind of person I would have become if I had met Touko in elementary school. That desire, a dream that could never see the light, only grew as I became closer to Touko.

"You mean Nanami-san? We were classmates in elementary school. She seems so different that I didn't recognize her right away."

"Huh..." Touko as an elementary student. I just imagined her as her current self but shrunk down. I couldn't picture her with the backpacks elementary students wore.

"What was she like?" I asked her out of curiosity.

“Well...” The literature club member put the corner of the book to her bottom lip. “She used to be quite plain.”

“How unexpected...” Now that was even more impossible to picture.

“She did what she was told and didn’t talk much. Her grades in school weren’t that great, and she was terrible at PE. Oh, and my scores were usually higher than hers.”

As I absorbed this series of her impressions, I almost wanted to ask, *Was that really Touko?* I wondered what had happened to make Touko who she was today. It felt almost as though she had been replaced at some point.

“I think she seems more like her older sister now.”

“Touko has a sister?”

“Yeah. I’ve only seen her once or twice though, so I couldn’t say for sure.”

“Hmm...” I never knew she had an older sister. I suppose I hadn’t talked with Touko about her family that much. If this older sister was anything like Touko, though, she would make a good impression on anyone she met.

“Oh, but Nanami-san’s sister is...” the girl added as though she had just remembered something, and then trailed off for a moment. I waited, curious about what she would say next. “Her sister passed away.”

“What...?” For a moment, I was so shocked that I couldn’t even hear anything else.

“I heard it was an accident, I think. It wasn’t as though our class went to the funeral, so I don’t really remember much.”

“I had no idea...” This must be the reason Touko never seemed to talk about her family.

Since it wasn’t a light topic of conversation, the girl didn’t say anything else right away. After feeling out the atmosphere, she seemed to purposefully change the subject, adopting a cheerful tone of voice. “So, why were you asking about Nanami-san, anyway?”

“Huh?” I couldn’t immediately come up with a good excuse. A faint smile formed on the girl’s face at my disproportionately surprised reaction.

“Well, you seem pretty close, so I figured you could have just asked her directly...” she pointed out. This was reasonable enough; I probably didn’t need to go about it as though I was staging an

investigation. But if I had asked Touko directly, she likely wouldn't have told me, especially since one of her relatives had passed away.

Should I really be snooping around asking other people about it behind her back? My conscience twinged. I probably shouldn't have, but I was so curious that I couldn't help myself. I felt like I still didn't understand anything about Touko.

"Are you actually not that close?"

"Maybe not," I murmured glumly, despite myself.

"No way. But aren't you two always together?"

"Well, not *always*... Why, is that what the rumors say?"

"They're not really rumors per se. More like your reputation, I guess? Two beautiful people next to each other are bound to draw attention. I didn't realize the other one was Nanami-san, but I knew about you, Saeki-san."

"Why did you only know about me?"

"Huh? Ah..." This time, it was the girl's turn to draw back in surprise. Then she hid her mouth with the cover of her book. "Oh, you know, reasons..."

She was muttering something that almost sounded like an excuse, but I couldn't quite make it out.

"Well...it saved me time not having to introduce myself, I suppose."

I didn't like being gossiped about, but apparently word was that I was always with Touko. I wasn't sure if I should be angry or pleased about that. At any rate, I couldn't keep interfering with their club activities, so I decided to leave before I overstayed my welcome.

The girl waved her hand slightly at me as she opened her book. "Um. See you later. Bye."

"Yes, thanks for your help."

Still reeling from the unexpected news, I hesitated over where to go once I stepped into the hallway. I had said I would go to the student council room right away, but I wasn't confident that I could feign composure in front of Touko right now. For the time being, I started walking, though my vision was blurred and my mind racing.

I had discovered a version of Touko who was unremarkable, which I couldn't imagine at all. The Touko I knew radiated exceptionality even when she was just sitting in the classroom. Fascinated by that, people gathered around her like moths to a flame.

I was one of them myself and was struggling to be more special to her than the rest. That was why I wanted to know even more about Touko. But now...

“Come to think of it...”

As I went down the stairs, I recalled a conversation from before. I wondered if the person Touko said she was a step or two behind in beauty might have been her sister. A sister who was almost exactly like Nanami Touko. I never knew her, but I was sure she must have been extraordinary. Especially if she really was like the current Touko.

It was possible, even, that Touko was intentionally imitating her dead sister. But why...? I could think up several reasons, but I wasn't certain about any of them.

In the end, I had no way of knowing unless I asked Touko herself.

I wondered if the reason Touko was so particular about the student council play was related to her sister. This was the very thing that I had wanted to know someday—and that *someday* had abruptly arrived.

As my thoughts grew all the more muddled, I found myself in front of the student council room. Since I had said I would come, I couldn't silently turn back. I doubted Touko would be angry at me, but if I broke a promise, no matter how trivial, it would hurt my own pride as well.

Thus, I entered the student council room. As usual, two of the upperclassmen were present, the president wasn't, and then there was Touko.

“Oh, Sayaka's here.” Touko, who had documents and files spread all over the table, broke out into a bright smile. Unlike me, she was her usual self, though that was to be expected. “Would you mind helping me out with some of this work?”

“Of course.”

I was less likely to overthink things if I was doing something. I put down my bag and sat next to Touko. She seemed in a good mood, possibly because her job had just been made easier.

“I think ‘I'm so glad Sayaka's here’ at least once a day.”

“That's quite an honor.”

I felt like I had given her a similar response once before. Normally, her compliment would have made my heart soar, but I was too distracted at the moment.

As I started my work, I glanced over at her face in profile. The perfect Nanami Touko. Tactful and courteous. Someone who would walk ahead of me.

If she was just imitating her older sister, I wondered where the real Touko was.

I had wondered before what would have happened if we had met in elementary school, but if Touko really was the way the girl had described, I wonder if I would have been drawn to her at all. During that time in particular, I had been so caught up in elevating myself, I might not have even bothered talking to her.

Then what about now? If Touko's perfection was a facade, then what had captured my heart all this time? My hands turned over the files automatically as my mind churned about other matters. The student council and Touko's sister. I could probably find answers if I looked into it further, but was that really something I should just go around investigating for my own selfish purposes?

If someone was digging into *my* past, I would find it unpleasant and would respond accordingly. But if it were Touko, I might be happy that she was trying to understand me. I doubted whether Touko would think of me in that way, but... Ah, my thoughts were getting a bit off track.

At any rate, snooping into someone's past without permission was a bad thing. That was fundamental, and there was no way I could be swayed about that.

I could either step in and make my move or pretend I had never heard anything.

“.....”

The fingers that held my pen filled with power and heat.

I didn't need to torment myself for a night or two. The answer was already clear to me: When it came to Touko, I couldn't resist the urge to know about her.

No matter what.

The past doesn't disappear. I'm sure mine is no exception.

No matter how much one tries to cover it up, it reappears, like snow melting away to reveal the ground beneath. And if there were was someone there to uncover it, it would appear even sooner.

In the classroom, I watched Touko, but not enough for her to notice. Touko was looking at the blackboard during class, just as she normally did. But I could easily turn my eyes away from her, and I

didn't feel the usual magnetic pull. In that moment, simply looking at Touko no longer satisfied me.

Now that I knew what I knew, my heart was muddled with confusion and doubt.

After that day, I went around the school and did a bit of digging. It was a simple enough task to find answers from teachers who had been working at the school around that time. I learned that Touko's older sister had been named Nanami Mio. And I learned the significance of the student council play. The reason Touko had diligently studied and gone from the person she was in elementary school to who she was today.

I concluded that the Touko I and our classmates normally saw at school was nothing more than a facade. She had neither self-confidence nor a strong spirit at her core. Touko was pleasantly deceiving most people, pretending to be perfect. I had been deceived myself so far. But now, when I looked at Touko, I thought I could see the shadow that lurked beneath.

Now that I had found out, that fact had become an inextricable part of my past and would never disappear.

The question of whether I would be able to love Touko if she ranked lowest during an exam now came back to haunt me. I knew even less about myself than I did about Touko—especially if the thing I sought from Touko hadn't existed in her at all.

What did I see in Touko?

While I was caught up in all those worries, something else came along to cause me even further distress. It happened just as lunch was ending and I was going back to my seat. When I put my hand into my desk in order to prepare for the next class, I felt the sensation of paper that wasn't my notebook on my fingertips. Wondering what I had put in there, I found a rectangular piece of stationery in my hand.

Of course, it wasn't a letter I had written myself.

"What..."

It couldn't be, I thought, frozen in place. The realization came crashing down on me like a sharp impact to my head.

First, I stealthily returned the mysterious letter to my desk and then propped my head in my hands. I didn't have the composure to worry whether doing so was rude. I simply closed my eyes. *I know what this is*. I thought about the first time I had experienced this.

First, I thought about whether they might have accidentally given it to the wrong person. But my desk was far from Touko's. *It's*

for me. The thought sent silent ripples of dread through my mind. My skin felt scratchy, and I remembered that day when I once jumped into the pool. At the moment, I felt like I could jump right back in. If that happened, I wondered if she would still be there.

I have a terrible habit, it seems, of always wanting to know the truth. It wasn't just with Touko. I was just the kind of person who couldn't stand not knowing things.

The contents could be time-sensitive, so I stealthily took out the letter before class started and opened the envelope. For a moment, I thought a letter seemed old-fashioned for an age where cell phones were ubiquitous, but the person who sent this likely couldn't contact me by phone. In that case, an antiquated letter was a reasonable choice. That the method had lasted for this long meant that there was some meaning and value in it, I thought.

I looked over the bluish-white letter from top to bottom. To be honest, the handwriting wasn't very pretty.

“.....”

The gist of the letter had been just what I was expecting and told me the person would be waiting behind the school at the end of the day. Though the sender's name seemed like it was probably a boy's, I couldn't recall his face. We were in the middle of class, so I took a stealthy look around, wondering whether he was in the classroom. Though I looked at the sleepy, rounded backs of the boys in the early afternoon one after another, it wasn't as though they had their names written on them, so I couldn't pinpoint whether he was among them.

Once I finished reading, I hid the letter in my desk, the words clearly stating that he liked me burned into my eyes like an afterimage. It wasn't my first time being confessed to, but it wasn't as though I had gotten used to it, either.

Just like before, the contents of the class wouldn't remain in my head, and the school day was over before I knew it. Touko, who of course knew nothing of my troubles, came to my desk as always.

I couldn't calm myself down, though in a different way from usual.

“Sayaka?” Touko tilted her head at me when I didn't move to stand up or get ready.

“I'm not...certain about today,” I responded vaguely. My choice of words wound up stranger than I intended.

“Oh, do you have something you need to do at home?”

“No, nothing like that. I'll head over as soon as I'm done.”

After I said it, the pulse in my wrist quickened as I wondered if Touko would guess my reason, since she had been in the same position before.

“Okay. Then I’ll head out ahead of you.” Touko’s reaction seemed only surface-deep, which was nothing out of the ordinary.

Yes, the Nanami Touko I saw during the day was actually just surface-deep, I thought as I watched her go, rooting me in my seat for a while. However, I actually had something I needed to do today.

I had to go turn down someone’s confession of love.

I didn’t intend to reciprocate a boy’s confession. Well, at the moment, I would have turned anyone down regardless of who it was. Still, it was a heavy decision.

In order to keep from being discovered by Touko, I waited a bit before I went down the path toward the student council room. I left the path partway and headed to that clearing, though I had never imagined that I would be summoned here myself. I already saw a shadow growing under the cover of the tree branches.

“Oh.” The boy quickly spotted me and walked over, swaying strangely due to his nerves.

“Hello.”

I didn’t know whether that was the right way to greet him, but I at least had to say something. The boy, who had been waiting, also returned an awkward “Hello.” I didn’t recognize his face from class. At least, I’m fairly sure I didn’t. He had a baby face and sloping shoulders, and limbs that were noticeably slender.

“I’m sorry for being late.”

“Oh, no. I just said after school and didn’t specify a time, so...at least, I don’t think I did, right?”

His voice almost seemed as though it would crack. Even though he was taller than me, his back and knees were bent so that it seemed like he was looking up at me. His letter had mentioned something along the lines of him admiring me. It was embarrassing that I already knew how he felt, since I now had to face someone who looked at me in that way.

“As for my response... First of all, I have to apologize.”

To start, I thought I should tell him the most important thing. The boy froze in his half-stooped stance, only his lips seeming to move as though they were rustling.

“Uh, yeah...um...okay.”

His voice dribbled out in short spurts, with nowhere left to go. Then he straightened his back and knees and put his hand on his hip, but his torso was still decidedly twisted.

“Uhh...I guess that’s all there is to say then.” The boy averted his eyes awkwardly. His ears turned red, revealing the blood and embarrassment circulating within him. The awkward silence lingering between us was the same as the atmosphere when a phone call has just been ended, but I felt that it would be rude for me to just say goodbye and leave him.

“Do you like someone else?” the boy asked cautiously.

A few days before, I would have been able to honestly answer yes.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted, which really was my current state of mind. I felt like I had fallen for a Touko that didn’t exist, but I also wouldn’t feel this conflicted if that were all there was to it, so I couldn’t find a place to let my heart settle.

“Does that mean you, like, have someone you’re interested in?”

“I think so.”

I didn’t know whether I really needed to reveal such things to a boy whom I had never spoken with before. Perhaps I just wanted to vent the worries that were plaguing me.

“Can I ask you something?” This time, I tried asking him a question. The boy’s shoulders stiffened as he nodded uncertainly. “So...you like me, um...the way I am now, right?”

“Yeah...yeah, I do.”

“Well, thank you.” I gave him a small bow.

“Oh, no, no...” The boy humbly ducked his head several times.

“So, what do you like about me?”

“Uh...” The boy’s face contorted. His arms flailed uncertainly in the air, as though he were drowning. “Is this...like, are you trying to torture me or something?”

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

“No, it’s fine...” The boy flapped his hand from side to side. “I might as well tell you...it’s your face. That’s the number one reason, anyway...yeah. You have a nice face.”

I almost laughed at the boy as he nodded earnestly but only because it was exactly the same reason why I had first fallen for Touko. I wondered if everyone was like that. Even Yuzuki-senpai... and that girl I had met in elementary school.

In that case...

"Then, what if my face was a lie?"

"Huh?"

"Just humor me. What if the face that I had right now was a fake that I used to hide my past?"

If that were the case, what would he do? I couldn't solve my problem internally, so I sought an external solution—from a classmate whose name and face I had only just learned.

I didn't expect much from him. However, the boy appeared to seriously contemplate the question before replying. "It's not like your past would cancel out who you are now... Although on the other hand, it's not like your past would disappear because everything is good now. Still, it doesn't seem like you're tied to your past, so the way you are now is everything. If you're beautiful now, I like you now. That's all I can say about it."

"....."

His answer had a lot more depth than I expected. As I accepted it, I felt its weight and almost had the urge to stare at it until it melted away. But the boy was clearly growing too uncomfortable to bear. He shifted back and forth unsteadily. "Well, you rejected me, though. Which is fine. Totally fine."

I hesitated for a moment about what to say to the boy, who repeated himself emphatically as if to hide his embarrassment.

"Thank you," I said at last, because he had answered me. Not because he had come to like me, though, I don't think.

"No, I should be the one saying that. Sorry for calling you out here. Well, uh, see ya..."

With that, the boy left quickly, heading off into the woods. I wondered how he was planning to get home from there. Wouldn't he get horrible bug bites from going through the dark, narrow gaps between the trees?

"I should be the one to say sor... Oh, never mind." I decided that it was better this way.

The way you are now is everything...?

Left alone, I felt exposed, the wind brushing against my fingertips. I gently pressed the palms of my hands together.

My hands felt neither warm nor cold.

After that, I pretended as though nothing had happened as I

participated in student council work. But just as we were going home...

“You said you had three cats at your house, right, Sayaka?”

Touko raised three fingers. That was one extra cat that I didn’t know I had.

“It’s two.”

“Oh, right. Are they cute?”

“Of course. We’ve had them since I was in elementary school, too.”

Though they seemed to have grown more attached to me over the years, they would still run if I tried to seek them out. But that fickleness was another part of what made them so wonderful.

“I wish I had cats.”

I didn’t know what had happened that day, but it seemed Touko had a craving for cat contact. *In that case ...* My mouth started to open, but I couldn’t say it and stopped.

Still unable to say it, I reached the gate and we parted like usual.

As I walked home alongside my elongated shadow, my regret followed me, clinging to my back. If only I had asked Touko if she wanted to come see my cats, we might have gotten slightly closer.

But that regret didn’t last long. That night, while I was sending messages back and forth with Touko, the tortoiseshell cat came into the room. It must have been in a good mood, since it walked around and around my chair and then nestled up to my legs. As I pet it, I impulsively decided to take a picture and send it to Touko. It took a moment for her to reply.

“Can I come by and pet it?”

“Huh...? To my house?” I replied.

“Where else would I see it?”

Right. It wasn’t as though I could scoop up two cats and meet her outside. But Touko coming to my house... All kinds of fears and hopes crashed up against me like a wall.

“All right.”

My answer was firm as a rock. Then, I realized a little late that we weren’t on a call, so it wasn’t as though she could actually hear me. I suppose I have to admit that I was nervous. I texted her back the same words.

“Then how about tomorrow?”

“That’s so soon.”

Of course, she still couldn’t hear my voice.

The following day, I waited for Touko in front of the train station. I no longer had a reason to ride a train, so I hadn’t gone to the station since junior high. I couldn’t help worrying about whether I would run into a certain person, although it seemed unlikely since this was a weekend. In the end, Touko was the one to appear first, so my anxiety had been needless.

When Touko saw the front of my house after I led the way there, she murmured, “Ooh, aah.” Was she that impressed? It seemed she was—by the gate, the wall, and also the garden.

“Is it really that unusual?”

“It is. Oh, but you were right—the garden really does look just like the area around the student council room. It’s amazing that it’s here in a normal house.”

When Touko stared up in wonder at the tops of the trees, I let out a chuckle. As we stood there, my grandmother emerged from the house and passed by us. She looked at Touko beside me.

“One of your friends?”

“Yes.”

“Hello. I’m Nanami Touko.”

When Touko greeted her, my grandmother looked at Touko with narrowed eyes and then gave a slight nod. “You be good to my granddaughter, now,” she said in lieu of a greeting and went through the gate.

Watching her leave, Touko asked me, “That was your grandmother, right?”

“Yes, on my father’s side.”

“She’s really dignified.”

“She certainly is. Though her posture used to be even more proper than it is now.”

My grandmother, whose back had always been beautifully straight, had inevitably been transformed by time. There was nothing good or bad about such changes—it was just the way things were.

Even when we went into the house, Touko didn’t stop ooh-ing and aah-ing. She was even impressed by the walls and the hallway. When I lead her to my room, she exclaimed, “Ooh, aah, ooh,” with an extra *ooh* for good measure.

“Which would you prefer first? The tea or the cats?”

“The cats, please.” Touko’s reply was immediate.

“Got it.” I left Touko in my room and went into the hallway. There wasn’t anything in my room that would be cause for concern if Touko found it...was there? I felt a little anxious.

I went around to anywhere I thought the cats might be while my grandmother wasn’t at home and eventually found the piebald. *This one ought to do*, I thought, picking it up. The piebald cat must have still been half-asleep, since its reactions were slow.

When I reentered the room with the cat in my arms, Touko turned away from looking over the bookshelf and brightened.

The bookshelf . A chill went down my back. She had probably seen the books in the corner that I didn’t actually care for. I didn’t think she could guess at anything just by seeing them, but I wasn’t sure. This was Touko, after all. And I didn’t want Touko to know about Senpai.

“Hello!” Touko gave the cat in my arms an excited greeting. The cat opened its sleepy eyes and then froze, shrinking away. When I opened my arms, it immediately hopped down and fled to a corner of the room. As I watched Touko going around and around in the middle of the room chasing after it, I couldn’t help snorting out a laugh.

Each time Touko steadily approached the cat, it gradually retreated, keeping a fixed distance between them. The piebald cat was cautious of Touko, since it had never seen her before, and didn’t make any move to approach her. Its center of gravity shifted towards its back legs, so that it could run at any moment if it was cornered.

“You have boys lining up to confess to you, but cats just can’t get away fast enough from you.”

“I wonder if my face is shunned in the cat world.” Touko joked along with me, smiling wryly. She stooped to be at eye level with the cat and show it she was friendly. As I watched her beckoning hopefully at the cat, I lost myself in my thoughts.

“.....”

There was much to think about. But at that moment, as she played with the cat, Touko was beautiful. It was as though my dreams and reality had aligned—Touko was Touko. The Touko that I saw here, right in front of my eyes, was everything. Even if it was a facade, even if she was actually a coward, both sides of her were still Nanami Touko.

There was nothing fake about her. This Touko was still the one

who stole my heart away. So, in this moment, I was sure that I loved her.

Touko looked up at me to lament that the cat had run away from her, paused, and then laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“It’s just that your face looked so relaxed for once, Sayaka.”



Touko's tone was relaxed, too. A calm atmosphere enveloped the room between us, as though a passing cloud had dispersed to let in the spring sunlight once again.

"Do I really seem that tense most of the time?"

"Hmm... You just have a serious face, I guess."

What does that look like? I wanted to ask her. Then, as though she had assumed I would ask, Touko added to her statement.

"It's really pretty, and you make sure you don't let anything compromise that...but you're also unconsciously working really hard to do so," Touko said cheerfully, still chasing after the cat that had escaped from her. "That's what I love about you—you're so diligent."

When she so lightly used the word *love*, it shot through me like an arrow. It was quiet, and so unexpected, that it went straight through my inner turmoil and into my heart.

It was true: I made sure to retain control over what others could see of me from the outside. I'm sure Touko was doing the same. Perhaps Touko felt a sense of affinity because she saw herself in me.

I feel the same way about you, Touko. I swallowed the words I wanted to say. My face probably did look serious, as Touko had said, as I turned my eyes away from her.

Yes, I would be diligent. I would work hard in order to fulfill my dreams. That much was obvious. I'd always been the kind of person who could produce good results if I tried hard enough, ever since I was a child.

Right now, I had something I wanted to do. To be by Touko's side, no matter what form that took. That longing ate away at me, like a thirsting throat that couldn't be quenched.

"Oh, wow. I never thought the time would come when it was your turn, Sayaka," Touko said as she emerged.

My turn? At first, I was quizzical. Then I looked around at my surroundings and realized what she meant. We were in the woods, slightly off the path to the student council room. Touko and I were alone in the private space between the trees and the wall of the school building. She must have misunderstood why I had called her here just because of the location and circumstances in which we were meeting.

I thought about when I had been confessed to just a short time ago and became flustered. "No, you have it wrong. It's not like *that*." I would be in trouble if she asked me any details about what *that* was supposed to be, so I quickly continued. "This place really is convenient

for a private conversation, that's all. Besides, people who haven't been here before can get here really easily without getting lost."

Though on the other hand, some people might get lost and wander into this clearing by mistake, too.

"Hmm. I've always been called out here by someone, never the other way around, so I never realized that." Touko nodded as if impressed. I smiled slightly at her odd way of looking at things, and a few cracks formed in the hard shell of tension around my heart.

After the closing ceremony, with summer break about to begin, I caught Touko in the classroom and brought her along with me to this place. Not to confess, of course. Well...it resembled a confession, but it wasn't as big of a deal.

As the sense of liberation and excitement carried everyone else towards the main gate, Touko and I faced each other. The sound of the cicadas, ever-present in the heat of July, seemed to build to a fever pitch, advancing on me from the right as if it had physical form. It felt like it was pressing down over my hair.

"I have to admit, I wasn't sure what to do if that were the case. So, what did you need?"

It seemed Touko was amenable, but a bit skeptical, about the formal summons I had given her. The talk wouldn't last long. It couldn't—my choices would make sure of that.

"....."

As I took a deep breath of the warm air, the back of my chest filled with lukewarm heat.

There was something I wanted Touko to know before summer break started. *I found out about your sister a while ago.* I was about to tell her this in order to take another step forward into her life.

"Actually, come to think of it, I was confessed to just a week ago," Touko blurted out, as though she had spotted something in the scenery.

"Again?"

"Yes, again. But it wasn't the same person as before, of course."

If it happened the week before, it must have been immediately after we finished our exams. I suppose the confessor must have wanted to tell her before we went into summer break...just like me.

"At this rate, it seems like you actually will get confessions from the whole school."

"I think it'd be kind of uncomfortable if it got to that point." She

smiled demurely, as though she didn't believe she could gather that much affection. "Anyway, I turned that person down with the same reason as usual, that I can't fall in love with anyone."

"Right."

"And then he started saying all this stuff. Like that even if I didn't like him now, if we spent time together and got to know each other, I might end up liking him back...but I don't ever see that happening."

Touko's casual denial was like a blade that sliced the words from my lips.

"But then I thought, oh, maybe that's how it is for normal people." Touko hurriedly tossed out the rest of her statement and then raised her face slightly. When she did, the shadows that extended from the trees followed her graceful features. "If that's what it means to fall in love, then I..."

I don't want anyone to fall in love with me.

She didn't actually go as far as to say that. But her hard tone made it clear. As if noticing that herself, Touko returned to a softer voice. "Oh, sorry. I came to hear what you had to say, Sayaka." She covered her mouth with one hand and looked at me apologetically. "Sorry for rambling. I'm listening now... So what did you want to talk about?"

But her urging was no use to me now.

"Right...yes. What I wanted to say was..."

I had no idea whether it was intentional or a coincidence, and Touko's face didn't reveal anything as she waited for me to speak. But her sudden outburst was more than enough to quell both my conviction and my voice. Touko had just denied there being any connection between understanding someone and affection. What was I supposed to say to her now? Should I still reveal that I understood her?

"Touko, you..."

Do you want to become like your older sister?

If I asked her that, she would likely deny it. Based on the perfection Touko disguised herself in, there was reason to believe she didn't want to just *seem* like her sister but wanted to actually *be* her.

But...I suppose her denying it would be the best-case scenario. What if my carelessly intruding on her personal life drove her away from me? That thought was what I dreaded most of all.

If she wanted to talk about it, I would be happy to listen and face her problems with her. But it wasn't as though I could just announce: *I found out about your sister and that the reason you're in the student council and worried about the play is because you're essentially trying to do it in your sister's place, so I'd like to talk about how that's going to affect you.*

And I also couldn't say: *It's important to remember someone who's passed on, but you can't get hung up on that, and if you would just think more about moving forward, I would be really happy to be by your side and support you, so let's do this together.*

Even though there were plenty of things I wanted to say, I couldn't say any of them.

...No, that wasn't true. I was lying to myself. There were plenty of things I *could* have said, but I purposefully kept my mouth shut. I did it for myself—in order to protect myself.

It was as though I were at a standstill, trying to be content with what I had. I looked into the distance. I let my thoughts travel far into the future.

I was pretending I couldn't see the present.

Then I spoke.

"Touko, I'm getting ahead of myself about this, but...I was wondering whether you'd go with me to the cultural festival?"

Summer passed, and the color of autumn deepened. Since the semester had just begun, we didn't have much work to do in the student council. This year, at least, the student council wasn't putting on any performances or activities at the cultural festival, so we weren't chained down by anything.

I couldn't tell what Nanami Touko thought about that from how she looked on the surface.

It was our first cultural festival of high school. Even the inside of the now-familiar school building gave off a completely different impression now that it was full of decorations and outsiders. When I looked at the lively, handmade decorations, it made me feel as if Christmas had come early. The people advertising performances bustled up and down the halls with many mismatched footfalls.

"Were there always this many students at our school?"

"Right? I wonder where they were all hiding."

The stream of people was particularly dense, since there were upperclassmen travelling past the first-year classrooms as well. There

were even boy-girl pairs of students wandering around, which caught my eye despite myself.

“You look pretty amazed,” Touko remarked, much to my embarrassment. I hadn’t thought I was staring around so obviously.

“Cultural festivals were a much more modest affair in my junior high.”

Back then, we just had a line of lackluster displays planned out in each classroom and an old movie showing in the gym. It was dim, dusty, and humid. As soon as I peeked in and saw what it was like, I immediately left. To be honest, the impression it left on me was mostly just that it was a very boring event. Compared to that, the high school version really did seem like an actual festival.

We passed by students holding stamp cards all over the place. They seemed to pique Touko’s interest, and her eyes followed them. Then her eyes met mine.

“Want to do it, too?”

“Hmmm...”

I did think it might be fun to go around the school with Touko, but Touko seemed indecisive as she walked towards the side of the hallway.

“Oh, it’s Serizawa.”

Looking out the window, she pointed at the corner of the lined-up stalls. The signboards of the stalls set up at the side of the school grounds sported cramped depictions of basketballs, takoyaki, and product names.

“Basketball takoyaki.”

Is it really? I cocked my head to the side. The takoyaki in the serving trays looked normal-sized no matter how I looked at them.

“That’s false advertising.”

There was a boy and a girl in charge of the stall cooking, and they both looked familiar. It was the girl who had confessed and the boy who had been confessed to, I realized. I couldn’t tell if they were trying to hide it from the others around them or not, but they seemed intimate as they talked, and their faces were slightly flushed.

“Is that what they call being young and in love?” Touko asked, pointing at them. I didn’t know how to respond.

“Well, they certainly seem to be having a good time.”

They had confessed their love to each other barely a month into starting high school and were still together. I guess they really were

drawn to each other by more than a passing whim, then. So time really wasn't everything.

We watched them enjoying themselves from afar as we stepped away from the window. After walking for a while, a familiar-sounding hawker called out to us.

"Hey, how about you two nice young ladies?" Manaka stood in front of a classroom, wearing her school uniform and a sign on her shoulders.

"What are you doing?"

"Can't you tell? I'm trying to get people to come to our program."

"Aren't you part of the going-home club?" She didn't even seem to be advertising a program that was related to the classroom she was standing in front of, either.

"I'm helping out Midori." Manaka gestured for us to peek into the classroom, where Midori was standing around in an apron looking bored. "It's a café organized by the English club where you can eat cookies shaped like the ABCs."

"How quaint..."

"Honestly, other than that, it's like any other normal café. Oh, and we can handle it if a foreigner comes by, so we've written this on the sign so they know they're in good hands. See?"

She pointed at the sign where the word "Heloo"—misspelled like that—was written out in large letters. That called into question the results of their day-to-day club activities.

"I sure can't speak it, though." Manaka grinned and flapped her hand in front of her face.

We decided to go in to show support for our friends.

Midori welcomed us with a smile. "So Manaka finally managed to snag some customers."

She led us to the window, which she claimed were the deluxe seats. The coffee and cookies we ordered came out immediately. When I smelled the aroma of the coffee as it came to us, I suspected it was the same stuff as what was in the student council room.

"Hey, doesn't this look kind of like the hiragana character 'ko'?"

There was a conspicuous character from the Japanese writing system mixed among the alphabet cookies.

"Oh, I made that one myself." Midori peeked at the table and offered an explanation. "It was originally supposed to be a 'K' but then

it broke. I wonder if the leftover ‘T’ is mixed in there, too. It’s pretty hard, y’know,” she grumbled, pressing her lips together and narrowing her eyes. “I guess I’ll need to practice more if we do another one of these.”

“You’re practicing making cookies...? Shouldn’t you be practicing English instead?”

“That’s not really the kind of club we are, ahaha.” Midori laughed it off lightheartedly. ...Then what kind of club was it supposed to be?

“Hey Sayaka, have you got a ‘Y’?” Touko asked, sifting through her cookies with her finger.

“I do, why?”

“Could you lend it to me?”

“Sure...” Responding to Touko’s request, I passed over the Y cookie. Touko took it and placed it in a gap between other letters.

“I did it.”

Touko flaunted her line of cookies. What she had done was spell out “SAYAKA.”

“I had a lot of A’s, so I was curious whether I could spell it.”

“Aha...ha...”

Between the way she was playing like a child, and the fact that she chose to spell out my name of all the possible combinations, I just couldn’t help laughing. “Let me try, too...”

I lined up my cookies. I started out with the T, so Touko probably immediately knew what I was doing. I quickly found the next letter, but my K had been broken.

“Hey, do you have any more K’s?”

“Hrm...nope.”

“What a shame...”

In the end, all I could do was spell out “TOUIO.”

“Who’s that?”

“...Touio.”

“Like I said, who?!” Touko opened her eyes wide, overreacting dramatically. Then the two of us laughed lightheartedly. It was silly but also quite fun.

After leaving the café, I meandered through the school with Touko again. Touko was already quite popular, so our pace was

slowed by all the greetings and conversations that started up as familiar faces passed by. As a result, we ended up slowly walking all around the school, and I started to feel like we might as well have tried to fill out a stamp card. Perhaps we could do it next year.

After that, we were tired from all the walking and decided to take a short break.

“Do you see anywhere we can sit?” I was somewhat reluctant to go to the café again, although there were probably plenty of open tables. Even though we were friends, it wasn’t free.

“Somewhere we could sit... Oh, I know a good place.”

Touko left the school building. I could guess what she had in mind based on the direction she walked.

“I see, you mean that place.” At this point, I could get there without getting lost, but I still stayed silent and let Touko lead me.

Soon, she guided us to the bench behind the student council room. It always felt deserted, but today it felt even more so. There were more insect voices than human to be heard.

“I wanted to take it easy for a bit, so this is perfect.”

Touko leaned up against the back of the bench and stretched. I was already well accustomed to sitting here together with her. Even when we both had bags, we now would sit a little closer. If I stretched out my hand just ever so slightly, I felt like I could reach her.

But I never tried to reach towards Touko.

At least, not now.

“So, next year...” I started saying something but then forgot where I was going with it. “I hope we get some good underclassmen.”

“Yeah.”

I wondered what kind of person Touko would consider to be a good underclassman. Personally, I was hoping for someone who was a hard worker.

I thought about what I had actually wanted to say next. *So, next year, let's give it our all?* No, that wasn't right. We needed to give it our all right now.

So next year, let's be more honest. But more honest about what?

I felt like the answer was right there, but it was stuck in a corner of my mind and wouldn't budge. It was a bit irritating.

Time drifted by sluggishly, and a very pleasant temperature wrapped around us, perfect for inviting drowsiness. We rested a while

in that quiet space, almost dozing off, until eventually we checked the time on our phones.

“Apparently, the music club has a performance in the gym this afternoon,” I repeated the details of a poster I had spotted as we left the school building. It was just the right time for it. “Want to go?” We wouldn’t be standing on that stage this year, but that was all the more reason.

“Yeah.” Touko stood up. She didn’t start moving right away though, simply narrowing her eyes as though she were staring into the distance. “Next year is so far away...”

I pretended not to hear Touko say that to herself as I started walking.

We walked by the edge of the forest and cut through the middle of the clamoring crowd to get to the gym. The pre-arranged chairs were mostly filled. I sat down beside Touko in seats a little more than halfway back.

Light gathered at the stage, and the audience seating grew dim. Before long, the curtain rose and the performance began. My ears weren’t discerning enough to tell the difference between good and bad music, but when the sound built up, it was powerful. It made me remember my time in the choir club. These days, thinking back on that didn’t feel quite so painful.

As Touko quietly listened to the performance, she murmured something that was part resolution, part prayer. “That’ll be us next year.”

“...Right.”

I wondered what performance she would put on while standing on that stage and what she would see. I looked at Touko, who was staring straight ahead at the stage. Perhaps her eyes were seeing her deceased sister. Touko was trying to fill that outline with herself. It was like she was trying to fit the wrong key into a keyhole, searching for a twisted exit without hesitation.

I almost found myself getting the slightest bit jealous of the sister Touko longed for so much. It didn’t seem likely that she would ever think of me to that extent.

The flow of the concert shifted. The fierce percussive performance took a rest, and the melody moved to the main woodwind section. As though the lighting were responding accordingly, the harsh lights dimmed and grew faint.

When the lighting changed so drastically, I looked down at

Touko's hand, which lay idle with nothing to hold on to.

Touko was bound to her sister by the word *love*. In addition to all the expectations of those around her, she was convinced that she had to do something for the person she loved. Even if the intensity of her feelings were different, I had once been the same.

“.....”

If someone based all their actions on such feelings, I wondered if they might become a different person entirely.

I had no siblings, so I couldn't speak to it, but I imagined that most sisters were alike. Being raised in the same environment and by the same parents, they had to end up sharing a lot in common. And yet, the fine details of their preferences, appearances, tastes, and personalities still wouldn't entirely match. Even if they started from almost exactly the same place, right down to their blood, they would never be exactly the same.

So I didn't believe it was possible for someone to replace another person, no matter how much of themselves they changed or chipped away.

Back in junior high, when I was in love and tried to change myself, I seemed almost like an entirely different person. I was losing myself so quickly that I felt like I was melting away and turning into an entirely different creature. But even so, my mistakes, those feelings, my rage, that pain, my disappointment, and helplessness—all of it—made me who I was today. It was me. It was all me. My own choices, my desires, were what made me who I am today. And because I had those experiences, I knew Touko's wish would never come true.

You can't be anyone but yourself, no matter how much you might change over the course of your life. And the only role we could perfectly perform was that of the person we were born to play. If you tried to replace someone, no matter how well you mimicked them, your imperfect performance would only lead to your own disappointment.

Touko would likely eternally be unsatisfied by her attempt to become her sister.

That was why...

Yes, that was why...

“.....”

...If I had said that...

...If I had told Touko that, would things have been different?

My thoughts raced, filling my head with one line after another. Endless ideas and words filled my brain. I wanted to turn this torrent toward Touko. I wanted to tell her what I really felt. I wanted to reach out to her heart, which even now was shrinking sadly in isolation.

But I caged those thoughts. I pressed my lips together so I would never let them out. Because I knew Touko didn't want that change.

After the lively performance carried by the woodwinds' tempo, the music baton ferried the band to the next musical piece. I found myself steadily sinking into a daze and couldn't follow the flow of the music. At some point, the lighting on the stage felt as though it had turned to me and was illuminating my mind.

I...I was terrified that Touko would reject me, and I would no longer be able to be by her side.

I loved Nanami Touko beyond all reason—both her strengths and her weaknesses. Even if I saw her weaknesses, her ugliness, her cowardice, her inferiority complex, her jealousy, her trauma, her real self, her public face, her hatred, her timidity, self-denial, her biases, her disposition, her hostility, her spitefulness, and all the many other dark things hidden inside her, I was certain now that I would be able to say I loved her even more.

But what Touko wanted was a good friend. She wanted someone who would respect a mutual sense of distance, who wouldn't pry into her most private secrets just as she wouldn't pry into theirs. That was the closest I could get to Touko as she was now, and I didn't want to give up the progress I had made towards that boundary. I wanted to be by Touko's side. I didn't want to change her, or change myself, as long as it meant I could stay beside her.

That was why...

Yes, that was why...

...I wouldn't cross Touko's path.

I would stay by her side anywhere she went, but on a parallel track. As long as I stayed on this unending track, I could continue on as far as I wanted. And it would always be the same distance from the track it ran alongside.

As long as I was by her side like that, someday—someday—I would be able to do what I needed to when I felt Touko had changed.

I could only wait and trust that time, or someone, would bring that *someday* about. I would just keep waiting for my chance, coward that I was. That was what Touko wanted, or so I told myself.

And so I said nothing.

I swallowed what I thought was right and chose to be wrong.

That was the decision I made, that I thought would allow me to stay by Touko's side and someday connect with her.

I will never forget that choice.

I must never forget.

The cherry blossoms at school began to fall around the start of April.

I caught glimpses of the flowers being buffeted by the warm wind at the edge of my vision. The fragrance of spring jogged my memories, taking me back to this time last year when I was secretly delighted to be in the same class two years in a row.

Now, it was the beginning of my last year in high school. We stood side by side as we looked up at the class lists that had been posted on the board. Among the cheers of some students, and the anguish of others, Touko and I stood stock-still like pillars.

"Did you find it?"

"Yeah."

I pointed at class three. Touko looked up and murmured, "I can't believe it."

Touko had found her name much faster than I had found mine.

I was in class three. Touko was in class one.

I lowered my hand, and Touko turned towards me with a rather unhappy smile. "I guess we couldn't be together forever."

"Indeed." My reply was half-automatic. The bland smile I pasted across my face felt like someone else had prepared it for me beforehand. I felt like this was all happening to someone else, just like when I parted ways with Yuzuki-senpai.

Oh, this won't do, I thought. I tried to take hold of my thoughts as they attempted to flee from reality and forced them to face forward.

"Touko." That name had once been difficult for me to use in conversation, but at some point it became perfectly natural. Touko waited patiently for my words. The chattering around us seemed to bounce away from my ears, so the sounds didn't fully reach me. "We're only going to be slightly apart."

Touko took a moment, inhaled deeply, and then smiled at my little show of bravery. "You're right."

My relationship with Touko wasn't so fragile that it would fall

apart just because of a little distance. What I had established between us wouldn't change. Even if the form it took wasn't what I wanted.

"Touko," I said again. Then I pointedly shifted my gaze. I was telling her that a certain someone was standing far behind her.

When Touko followed my eyes and turned around, she seemed to successfully guess at what I was pointing out. Touko's shoulders turned that way to head in her direction, but then she paused, as though it pained her to do that to me.

It was enough that she had thought about me slightly in that moment, so I smiled. I thought that the expression on my face was appropriate for the gentle spring air.

Touko accepted that for face value. "I'll just be a minute," she told me and headed off to where that girl was.

I almost responded but decided against it. *See you soon* was an expression you only used for someone who was actually coming back.

The wind rushed past me, as though caressing me on its way by, and carried Touko away from me along with a storm of cherry blossom petals. When did I start only ever seeing her from behind again, I wonder?

For the last two years, all I had done was follow Touko. But somewhere along the way, we stopped being by each other's sides and even grew slightly further apart.

Only slightly. But the difference that slight amount made showed itself to me as I saw Touko leaving me.

Hesitation, regret, loss...though I dug those things out of my heart, I couldn't find anything to be positive about. Had I made the wrong choice? I wondered whether I could have remained by Touko's side if I had run parallel to her for eternity.

The answer was...no.

When she met Koito-san, Touko found herself at a crossroads. She finally found the ability to accept someone whose road intersected with hers. As soon as that happened, I lost my chance to get closer to her on my parallel path.

But even though I knew that these changes in her weren't caused by me, I still couldn't help wishing that I could keep walking alongside Touko.

In the end, that wish didn't come true.

Even so, I want to believe that I did cross paths with Touko, if only for a moment. Even if our paths went in separate directions

afterward.

The spring sunlight and the cherry blossom petals danced together, and something warm brushed against my face. A bright light seemed to blur the face of the schoolgirl standing next to Touko so that I couldn't make it out.

I had been determined I wouldn't fail again after becoming a high school student.

I had thought that as long as I knew why I had failed, I wouldn't fail again the next time.

I thought that I understood everything about what it meant to love someone.



But I actually learned what that meant after I met *her* .

Like the Distant Skies

I FELT MY SCATTERED THOUGHTS collect and focus on something in front of my face, like the sensation of narrowed eyes opening.

I put my hand on the bench and realized that the sky I had absently been looking up at had undergone a slight transformation. Dense clouds flowed in from afar and were attempting to temporarily hide the sun. Just before it was snuffed out as though covered by a lid, one last warm beam of light soaked my shoulder.

Spring allowed me the vulnerability to easily accept my surroundings. Maybe that was why it was such a comfortable season.

I was between lectures in college. I'd left my friend who was in the same lecture to steal a short moment of alone time. The bench behind the building was empty, with only the shadow from the wall to keep me company. The scenery that accompanied it—the sunlight streaming through the leaves and the mild fragrance from the trees—reminded me of the path to the student council room.

Perhaps that was why I let my mind drift freely down memory lane.

The sun momentarily obscured itself with the clouds, so I could look up at the sky again without being blinded by its light. The amount of time that had passed since high school felt as far as the distant sky.

Nothing that had surrounded me during that time remained by my side now. I took a deep breath as I reflected nostalgically on the atmosphere of the student council room.

When I first became a high school student, I had reminisced about junior high in the same way. Now I was a college student and reminisced about high school. I kept moving forward, repeating the same cycle.

This time, I had no regrets.

No, that's not true. Of course I had regrets.

Still, it wasn't so bad if I could bluff that I had none without it being too much of a stretch. I was satisfied with that.

The clouds kept moving without a pause and left the sun behind. When the sunlight suddenly shone directly on me, I lowered my eyes and almost closed them. There, my gaze fell on a pair of feet. It was so sudden, I was slightly taken aback.

I hesitated for a moment about whether to move my eyes up or down from the feet. Up, of course. When I raised my head, I could tell the person was a girl from her clothes and build.

At some point, this girl had come to lean against the wall of the lecture building. She was just a few steps from the bench and had tears in the corners of her eyes. The edges of her eyes and the tip of her sniffing nose were red. It didn't seem like she was having seasonal allergies. Those looked like tears of grief.

But it's so nice out, I thought for some odd reason. Still, I really did feel like springtime wasn't the right time for tears.

"Ugh, it's so...buh?"

The girl seemed to have finally noticed me as my thoughts wandered. Her wet eyes, which were brimming with tears, caught sight of me and froze. She wiped them quickly, looking embarrassed. I wouldn't have guessed I would meet someone with so many complications in this place, where hardly anyone ever came... But I suppose she had come here because it was usually empty. That much was obvious.

That said, I was at a loss about what to do. She seemed to feel equally awkward.

"I'm sorry." I apologized instinctively, though that wasn't really what the situation called for. We had just happened across each other in a slightly awkward way.

"Same here. Ermm..."

It wasn't as though I could tell her, *Don't mind me*. I picked up my bag and stood up from the bench.

"Oh..."

I bobbed my head politely and left, not waiting for the girl to finish whatever she was about to say. Between someone who was crying and someone who was basking in the sun, it was obviously the former that needed breathing room. Better to let her have the space.

Even though I still had time to spare, I headed towards the classroom of my next lecture. The road to the building I needed diverged onto many other paths, stairs, and gates. It reminded me of a narrow alleyway from my childhood. I had gone down it occasionally when I thought I would be late to swim class.

Once I turned off the road, I looked back, wondering if she was still crying back there. I could still clearly remember the last time I had cried, even now. Still, if I hadn't cried since then, that wasn't such

a bad thing.

When I entered the classroom on the first floor of the lecture building and contacted my friend, she reported back with a cute emoji that she was taking a free study period. College students liked to use important-sounding phrases, even when what they meant was that they were skipping class.

Thus far, I had gone to every lecture for the classes I was in. I didn't have anything that was important enough to skip lectures for anyway. I wondered what my friend had found that was.

"Oh..." As I sat by myself and waited for lecture to start, a tiny exclamation of surprise escaped my lips.

The girl who had been crying was at the entrance. She appeared to have noticed that I had seen her, as she was frozen in place staring back at me. The students coming in behind her slipped around either side of her, giving her puzzled looks as they went. Realizing she was standing in the way, she started to stumble uncertainly to the left and right.

Evidently, not sure of where to go or what to do, she almost looked like a scared, confused dog. I took a closer look at the girl. Her vibrant hair flowed with her nervous movements, and there was something lively and distinct about the way she moved her limbs, her petite body visibly overflowing with energy.

The lost girl came over to me. The long lecture hall desk was sandwiched between us as she started talking to me. I didn't sense any tears in her voice anymore.

"Can I sit here—next to you?"

"Go ahead..."

My friend wasn't coming anyway. The girl sat down, leaving a seat in between us. It started to feel like a strange situation.

"About before..." The girl's face was turned down toward the desk as she spoke haltingly. I waited for her to continue, since it appeared that she was having a hard time saying it.

"Thank you."

It seemed like she had been hesitant about whether to apologize again. The girl stole a glance at me from the side of her eyes. The traces of her tears were immediately obvious when I looked at her profile.

"Don't worry about it." Honestly, she hadn't done anything wrong.

“But I *am* worried about it...” The girl took a deep breath while covering her eyes. Of course, I would have minded if someone had seen me crying, too. I think I would have wanted the other person to forget it. People were apt to feel anxious when exposing their weaknesses. They were afraid that the people around them would come to dislike them because of it.

Suddenly, Touko came into my thoughts. She had never truly revealed her weaknesses to me. I still felt a little forlorn about that, even now.

The girl seemed a little hesitant about whether to leave her seat, but the instructor had arrived now, so she decided to stay for the course of the lecture. The girl put her bag back down and started getting her writing supplies ready, occasionally glancing in my direction. And since I noticed that, that meant I was looking at her, too.

I was curious about why she had been crying, but of course we weren't close enough for me to get involved.

“.....”

I remembered my friends from high school, Manaka and Midori. The two of them probably would have been able to share why they were crying immediately.

Whether it was quick, shallow, deep, or cautious, taking the first step in a relationship was difficult.

“I never thought I would end up crying so soon after coming here.”

Oh? When I heard her complain to herself, my interest was piqued.

“Are you a first year?”

I decided to respond in a roundabout way to this new information. The girl's mouth hung half open, as if she was equally surprised at herself. *What about you?* the movement of her eyes seemed to ask.

“A second year.”

“Does that make you my upperclassman, ma'am?” She was suddenly awkwardly formal. I realized immediately that she wasn't used to being formal with upperclassmen. It seemed a bit strange to me.

“Don't worry about it. You can talk to me like normal.” Forcing formality from someone who wasn't used to it would just be an ordeal for both of us.

“Are you sure?”

“Why not?” I didn’t feel confident enough to act like someone’s upperclassman anyway.

“Well, then, don’t mind if I do.”

“All right, but the lecture is starting, so the professor might mind if we talk right now,” I warned her gently. Maybe that was a bit upperclassman-like of me after all.

She opened her mouth but didn’t say anything, as though her voice had failed her. I faced forward, but privately I was still thinking about it. *A first year, eh?*

I guess enough time has passed for me to have an underclassman again .

After that, the lecture finished, and the question of what to do next hung in the air.

Neither the girl nor I left the classroom immediately. There was something subtle holding us back, like we still had some baggage left behind. Even if I hadn’t been her upperclassman, this was probably one of those moments where I needed to make the first move, since I was older.

I felt conflicted, like the times I wasn’t sure who was supposed to hang up a phone first. Finally, I stood up. The girl also stood up, as though copying me.

“I want to tell you something, but it’s going to sound really sudden and bonkers,” she said.

“Um. Pardon?”

“After what happened earlier, I was so worried about what to do because you were on the bench next to me that I just sorta stopped crying. Haha...” The girl turned her eyes away for a moment but eventually faced me again. “So, that’s why I wanted to thank you.”

“I see...”

Oddly enough, even though I was being thanked for something I hadn’t done deliberately, it didn’t feel wrong. Maybe it was because of the girl’s bright voice and personality.

Just when I thought that was all she had to say, she kept going, “If you would be open to it, what would you think about grabbing a bite to eat after this?”

The girl was doing a pretty slapdash job of addressing me politely as she looked up at me. Our eyes were at slightly different

heights when we faced each other. I usually went to eat with my friend, but I didn't have plans that day.

The only one around was this girl.

"Sure," I agreed, after thinking a bit. The girl burst into a smile like a blooming flower. Her tears were nowhere to be seen as the corners of her eyes and mouth softened. She was the very picture of springtime.

"Lead the way, Senpai," she said lightly and stepped up to stand next to me.

"Senpai, huh..."

As I repeated her, a small chuckle escaped my lips. She seemed slightly puzzled by my response.

"It's nothing."

I had just recalled an underclassman I would never forget.

It was an easy enough task, since I had met up with her a handful of times recently. I might even see her more often than I did Touko these days. It was easier to meet with her—not just geographically but also mentally. Touko was a wonderful friend, and we had great conversations that put a smile on my face whenever we met, but I definitely still had reservations. There was a possibility those would remain for the rest of my life. Though time might heal all wounds, the sutures would leave a scar that couldn't be erased.

But I definitely didn't have regrets, even about the pain. It helped me remember the strength of the feelings I had during that time. That was much better than forgetting and letting it all fade away.

"Oh, right. What's your name?" the girl asked me as we left the lecture hall.

At some point, when my name drifted into my thoughts, it had become properly written kanji characters—both my family name and my given name. I didn't mind being called either, and I liked the sound of both of them.

It was a name I wanted to hold dear.

"Saeki Sayaka."

I was sure the weather outside of the lecture building would be sunny again. So much so that I would want to stare at the sky for too long and let my thoughts soar through the distant blue.

Even as a college student, or even further in the future, I might

make mistakes again.

Regardless, I still wanted to know more about coming to love someone.

I wanted to run into love again.

I could genuinely believe that, all because of the ones I had met so far.

Afterword

AND SO, we reach the end of the second novel.

Hello, I'm Hitoma Iruma.

I think I did my best to not stray from the original work, but I'm not sure if I managed it. If you feel differently, then I'm very sorry. Because I'm fundamentally writing with the assumption that the book's audience has read the manga, there are a considerable number of spoilers about how the original manga develops. In fact, this book actually touches on things that happen after the manga, which I suppose is as big a spoiler as it gets. I think that if you can, it's best to read the manga first and then this book. Although I doubt anyone who hasn't read the original story would pick up this book...especially since it's the second volume.

So that's that. Thank you very much for buying this book.

—Hitoma Iruma

Hello, I'm the author of the original work, Nakatani Nio. I love books in the first-person perspective. In manga, everything is presented through art and the perspective fundamentally becomes third person-centric, so I adore that novels can be written with the entire book from an individual's point of view. (In fact, I once tried to make a manga where every frame was from a first-person camera perspective, but it definitely came out peculiar.) Since this is all about what Sayaka saw and thought, it's such a luxury to read this book... At least, that's how I felt. Thank you for writing the second volume.

—Nakatani Nio



There was the girl I met in elementary school.
There was Yuzuki-senpai, whom I met in junior high.
There was Nanami Touko, whom I met in high school.
And then...

Even as a college student, or even further in the future,
I might make mistakes again.
Regardless,
I still wanted to know more about coming to love someone.

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